

The World as We Knew It

Disclaimer: I own nothing. All the credit goes to JK Rowling.

Rating: PG-13 for language and violence.

Warnings: Violence, language, character death, minor DH spoilers in later chapters (mostly because I made lucky guesses about Horcruxes and a certain greasy-haired Death Eater).

Night had fallen, hot and humid over the rows and rows of identical houses. Most of the windows were lighted, displaying families gathered around dining tables or scrunched around tellies. One upstairs window was lit on one of the houses however, and next to it sat a teenage boy with messy black hair and glasses. He was gazing out of the window with a distant expression on his face, his hand absentmindedly massaging the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.

It was Harry's first night back at Privet Drive. Only a few hours before, he had said good-bye to Hermione and Ron, promising them that he would owl them in a week or so when he felt he had spent enough time at the Dursleys' to fulfill Dumbledore's request that he return to his aunt and uncle's house one last time. Hermione had tearfully kissed his cheek and hugged him goodbye, assuring him that in the following days she would be researching ancient possessions of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor in the stacks of books she had borrowed from Hogwarts' library. Harry had smiled ruefully—this was definitely the Hermione he had been best friends with for the past six years. "And Ron, you ought to take some books and look too," she had finished, looking sternly at the tall, gangly, red-headed boy.

"Come on, Hermione, it's the holidays!" he had protested.

"And you've got much more important things to do than eat, play Quidditch, and gape at Fleur all summer," she had retorted. Then she had dissolved into tears again and quickly kissed Ron on the cheek before picking up her bag and dashing away through the gateway from Platform Nine and Three Quarters to the rest of King's Cross.

Ron had stared after her for a moment, then seeming to come to himself, he slapped Harry on the back and said, "See you in a few weeks, mate," before leaving to join Ginny and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Now as Harry thought about it, he wished he'd said good-bye to Ginny, but they had been pointedly avoiding each other ever since the funeral that morning. He steeled his resolve once again, but couldn't help the flood of memories that filed past his unseeing eyes. Ginny playing Quidditch, her red hair flying behind her, Ginny telling off Ron, Ginny hexing Crabbe and Goyle, Ginny spending those sunlit glorious hours with him under the shady tree near the lake, Ginny kissing him after they had won the Quidditch Cup...

No, he mustn't... He couldn't think of it... Voldemort would hurt her, and that was the last thing he needed, another death to feel responsible for. Harry looked down at the cool metal locket he was holding in his hand, and thought of Dumbledore. His throat tightened as he was once again struck with the finality of Dumbledore's death. He would never again be able to speak to that great wizard, the man who had mentored him, helped him, guided him... loved him.

And Dumbledore had died at the hands of that traitor, Snape. It was all in vain, the trip into the cave, the horrible potion Dumbledore had drunk, Harry thought as his fingers caressed the locket that was nothing more, for it hadn't been a Horcrux after all. He vaguely wondered if Hermione had figured out who R.A.B. was yet. Harry knew he should care, should wonder, but all he felt was an odd sense of detachment. It was probably because he had just lost the fourth most important figure in his life. His parents, Sirius, Dumbledore...they were all gone. It was just Harry, now.

The clock downstairs struck eleven. Harry felt his eyes becoming heavy and finally decided to go to bed. After undressing, he crawled under the covers, and removed his glasses. Stray thoughts wandered through his mind, wishful thoughts. He wondered what would have happened if his parents had lived. He wished he could talk to them, just once. Just a few words would be nice. Harry thought about his godfather, Sirius, who had died because of Bellatrix Lestrange. If only they were still alive... He felt almost like he was betraying Dumbledore, thinking about his parents when Dumbledore's death

was the one he should be feeling most deeply. Harry's eyes were almost closed now, and his last waking thought was...

Harry awoke to the sunlight streaming down on his face. He rolled over and groaned, pulling the covers over his head. There was a knock on the door. "Go away," he muttered.

The knocking continued. "Aunt Petunia, I'll weed the garden later! Just let me sleep a few more minutes!"

The door swung open. Someone, a man, was laughing jovially. "You thought I was Petunia Dursley?" Harry started. Quickly he rolled back over and sat up, reaching for his glasses. Except his glasses weren't there; his hand was grasping empty air. The room was all blurry, but Harry could see the outline of a man cross the room and pick something up from a nearby piece of furniture. A moment later, his glasses were being pressed into his hand, and the man sat on the edge of his bed. Harry shoved the glasses on...and gasped.

James Potter was sitting on his bed. It could be no other. He was tall and lean, with jet black messy hair, and sparkling brown eyes. "Thought you'd sleep in just because it was the first day of summer, huh?"

Harry gaped at him. This had to be a joke. It couldn't be real. Then it occurred to him, this man must be a Death Eater using Polyjuice. "Yeah," Harry said, trying to sound casual, just like it was an everyday occurrence to meet a parent you had thought to be dead all your life. "Yeah. I thought I'd sleep in, that's all. I was just dreaming about the Dursleys for some reason."

"We haven't seen them in years," James said, grinning. "I don't mind at all, but I think your mother misses Petunia once in a while. Harry...what are you doing?"

Harry had edged out of bed and towards the desk on which he had spotted his wand. With the reflexes of a Seeker, he snatched up the wand and had it pointed at the Death Eater before James had time to draw his own wand.

“Who are you?” Harry hissed. “What do you want with me?”

James’s eyes were wide, his mouth slightly open. “Harry James Potter. Put that wand away! It’s me, your dad!”

“No, you’re not. You’re a Death Eater, aren’t you? Under Polyjuice? Another one of Voldemort’s ploys to get me. Don’t move, or I’ll hex you!”

James rolled his eyes. “What has Moody been teaching you in Defence Against the Dark Arts? How to be so paranoid that you pull your wand on anyone who enters the room?”

Harry was momentarily thrown off guard. “Moody’s not the Defense teacher,” he said. “Snape is...or was.”

James drew back a little. “What are you talking about? Snape is a Death Eater,” he said contemptuously. “He’s never taught at Hogwarts.”

“Liar! I thought all Death Eaters knew Snape taught Potions at Hogwarts for years and years!”

James sighed. “This is getting nowhere. Fine then, ask me a secret question, then you’ll know who I really am.”

Harry looked at the older man warily, but he was thinking. What could he ask? Finally it came to him. “What spells did you use against Snape down by the lake right after your Defence Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. exam?”

James looked shocked. “How did you know about that?”

“Never mind. Just tell me.” Harry’s arm was aching, but he still held the wand aloft.

“Levicorpus and Impedimenta. And Scourgify.”

Harry started to lower his wand. This wasn’t a dream. Only his dad would have remembered that so clearly...Unless this was Snape

sitting before him under Polyjuice. He raised his wand once more. "One more question. What form does your Animagus take?"

"A stag."

Harry lowered his wand, but James held up a hand. "If we're going to do it right, I've got to ask you a question too."

Harry waited nervously, hoping he knew the right answer. If his father was truly alive, he wasn't sure of anything now. His mother was alive too. That meant...maybe Sirius had never gone to Azkaban. Maybe Dumbledore had never died. Maybe...

"What is your cousin's name?"

Harry grinned. This was too easy. "Dudley."

"And...just to make sure...what position do you play on the Gryffindor team?"

The word "Seeker" was on his lips it occurred to Harry that he might not be a Seeker in this world. Maybe James had taught him to play a different position growing up. He looked around the room and noticed a moving poster of Uraiah Yates, Keeper for the Oxford Otters on his wall. No posters of Seekers were present. "Um...Keeper?"

"Right. So will you stop this Death Eater business and get downstairs? Your mother's making fried eggs, and Sirius is coming over later this morning."

Harry's heart leapt. Sirius was alive and well. But he merely mumbled, "Sorry, Dad. Moody said constant vigilance. I'll get dressed and be down in a minute."

James left, still shooting odd glances at Harry over his shoulder. Harry pulled open the wardrobe and selected a t-shirt and pair of jeans he had never seen before. After dressing, he stuck his wand in his back pocket and flopped down on the bed. This couldn't be real, could it? What had happened overnight? He thought of his last waking memories the night before. He had been wishing that his parents were still alive.

Did I bring them back to life? He wondered. Harry ran his fingers through his hair and automatically stroked the part of his forehead where the scar was. Except that now the skin was smooth.

He froze in shock, then sat up and pulled his wand out. He murmured the spell *specularis* and a mirror erupted from the tip of his wand. As Harry looked into it, the truth hit him hard—his scar was gone.

Chapter 2

Breakfast was delicious, but Harry wasn't thinking about the food. His eyes followed his mother around the kitchen as she bewitched the dishes to wash themselves and the ingredients to fly back to their places in the cupboards. She was more beautiful than any of the pictures he had seen. She had thick reddish-brown hair and her green eyes sparkled and danced when she smiled. His father sat at the head of the table, reading the *Daily Prophet*. "What a load of rubbish," James exclaimed over the paper. "Listen to this: 'The Ministry of Magic announced this morning that Minister Lucius Malfoy is considering a decree to ban all half-bloods from government positions.'"

Harry choked on his orange juice. "*What?*"

"I know, it's outrageous. There aren't enough purebloods left to occupy all the ministry positions. I daresay You-Know-Who has just about cleansed the wizarding world of Muggle-borns. He'll be working on making it completely pure-blooded next."

"He's gotten rid of all the Muggle-borns?" Harry said incredulously, his mind spinning to process the new information. Lucius Malfoy, minister of magic. He never thought he'd see the day. He wondered if Voldemort had ever fallen in this world.

James's eyebrows shot up. "Where have you been for the last seven years? Think, Harry. When was the last time you saw a Muggle-born at Hogwarts? You-Know-Who has banned them from the school ever since he came back to power."

"What happened to them?" Harry said, wildly wondering if Hermione was out there, with her extreme intelligence and brilliant skills, still thinking she was a Muggle.

"Some don't know the truth that they're witches and wizards. Some were killed off by the Death Eaters when they protested the law, and some were secretly smuggled out of the country to attend foreign schools. Salem, Durmstrang, Beaubatons, and Poudmoor all

opened their doors secretly to British Muggle-borns. And some hid their lineage, like your mother.”

The conversation was interrupted when the door flew open and a girl with bright green eyes and dark hair highlighted by auburn streaks stalked in.

“First day of summer and you won’t even let me sleep in,” she said accusingly to James. “Come on, Dad, just once I’d like to wake up on my own!”

“Maybe you’d wake up earlier if you weren’t up late last night on the telephone with Luna,” Lily Potter called from the kitchen.

The girl slumped into the chair opposite and glared at Harry. “You told her, didn’t you?” she spat at him. “You’re such a prat.”

“Leila,” Lily said, a warning note in her voice. “Watch your mouth. Your brother did no such thing. I overheard you on my way to bed. Now apologize.”

Leila looked disgruntled, but she stared down at her lap and muttered, “Sorry.”

Harry said nothing. He was still trying to digest this new information. He had...*a sister*? He looked her over; she definitely had inherited characteristics from both parents with her dark hair and almond-shaped green eyes. She didn’t wear glasses, and her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail secured by a ribbon. She was wearing a pair of old jeans and a red shirt that accented the auburn locks in her hair. Lily waved her wand and a plate of bacon and eggs came flying across the room to land in front of Leila, who began to eat sullenly.

Suddenly James swore and threw down the paper in disgust.

“James! Language!” Lily said sharply, glancing up from the pile of potatoes that were peeling themselves.

“I never thought I’d see the day the Ministry would be so corrupted,” James sighed. “My father used to work for the Ministry, and he was on the Wizarding Grimott. He had nothing but good things to say

about the way the government was being run, but now...well, it's so corrupt! And most of the people on power don't even know that the whole Ministry is being controlled by You-Know-Who."

"Cause Malfoy's one of Voldemort's Death Eaters," said Harry automatically

James looked surprised. "Well, yes, Harry. Don't say that name, though. Nowadays it could get you killed on the streets."

"Dumbledore says fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself," Harry said before he could stop himself, irked that his own father wouldn't say the name.

There was a crash from the kitchen. Lily had dropped the dish she was holding onto the tile floor. Quickly she waved her wand and repaired it, then turned to Harry. "Where did you hear that?" she said quickly, white-faced.

"I...er, heard it somewhere," Harry said. "Why?"

Lily sank down into the chair next to Harry's and sighed. "Harry, you know how people feel about Dumbledore these days. After his death, the Ministry covered everything up and said he had turned to the dark side. They gave Malfoy the credit for defeating the Dark Lord and made him Minister of Magic. We know the truth, though," she said softly, placing one hand on Harry's shoulder affectionately. "We know that he died duelling You-Know-Who."

Harry reeled back in surprise. "Dumbledore's dead?" he said, dumbfounded. *Dumbledore?* Dead from duelling *Voldemort*? "When?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Right before you were born," Lily said softly, looking out the window with a distant expression on her face. "He was the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had. He battled You-Know-Who until both of them were weak from the fight and then Dumbledore tried to kill him."

"But Voldemort didn't die," Harry prodded, hoping to get the whole story out of his parents.

"No." James answered this time. "And no one knows why. It seemed like You-Know-Who died, those who witnessed it said he kind of just disappeared. And Dumbledore died shortly after, probably from the strain and intensity of the fight. He wasn't young."

"Tell me again about how Voldemort rose to power again," Harry said. His parents both glanced at him; his mother's glance was condoling, but his father looked suspicious. "Um...you know how it is with the Ministry interfering at Hogwarts these days," Harry put in quickly, guessing that if Lucius Malfoy was Minister of Magic, Hogwarts would be no better than it was during the days Dolores Umbridge was headmistress. "You can't trust anything you hear anymore."

It seemed to be the right answer, because his father broke his inquiring gaze. "It happened seven years ago, before you went to Hogwarts, remember?" Harry nodded, to keep him talking. "I don't know he did it, but I suppose he made himself a new body, since it seemed he was broken, powerless, and bodiless before that. I suppose he called upon really ancient dark magic to perform the ritual, but it probably doesn't matter. What matters is that he's more powerful than ever before and everyone's under the impression that resisting him is useless." James's shoulders slumped. "The Order disbanded."

"What?" Harry couldn't believe it. The Order of the Phoenix, give up?

"I thought I told you about that," Lily broke in, looking at him curiously. "I owled you and your sister last fall."

"Ahh...maybe she forgot to give me the letter," Harry lied.

His explanation seemed to mollify his parents, but he noticed that Leila was listening very carefully now to the conversation and watching Harry, an unreadable expression on her face.

"We re-formed after You-Know-Who..."

"Say 'Voldemort,' Mum," Harry said. "No one else is here."

She nodded. "We re-formed after V-voldemort's return, and fought him for years, but it's too dangerous to have any kind of organization

against him, now that he's got the Ministry under his thumb. We fought, but whenever Voldemort suspected anyone of being against him, he sent Death Eaters to their house and..." She broke off, wiping a tear from her eye.

James jumped in. "He lets people know exactly what will happen to their families if they refuse to join him. He murdered my parents right after his return to power. Lily's parents...well, that was just recently, remember?"

Harry nodded, though he didn't remember anything. "How come he hasn't killed you?" he asked.

"You, me, your mother, Leila, this house—it's all under the Fidelius charm. Sirius is our Secret-Keeper. I suppose that charm was applied so long ago that you wouldn't remember it."

"Which members of the Order died again?" Harry knew he was pushing his luck, but he simply had to know. He hoped they wouldn't ship him off to St. Mungo's for supposed memory loss.

"Let's see..." Harry's mother ticked the names off on her fingers. "The Prewetts..."

"No, Mum, the ones that died in the second war," Harry said, having been told the list before. "Moody showed me an original Order photo and told me who died in the First War," he explained quickly, when his mum shot him an inquisitive look.

"Oh, okay... Second war: Arabella Figg. Dedalus Diggle, Sturgis Podmore, Rubeus Hagrid..."

"They killed Hagrid?" Harry exclaimed, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Took ten Death Eaters to take him down too," Lily said sadly. "Oh, and they got Charlie..."

"Weasley?" Harry said very quickly.

Lily nodded. "Yeah, him and Tonks at the same time. They were to be married too. I'm sure you've met his brother Ron in school."

"I've met him," Harry said, smiling a little, remembering all the things he'd done with Ron—homework late at night, practicing Quidditch, escaping the Acromantula in the Forbidden Forest, practicing in the DA, the giant chess game they'd had to get across to get the Philosopher's Stone...

Then what his mother said sank in. "They got Tonks too?" he said. His breakfast was balling up in his stomach.

"That poor family," his mother said, still going on about the Weasleys. "Arthur and Molly have seen it all... first their daughter, then Charlie..."

Harry gave her a blank stare. "What happened to Ginny?"

"Oh Harry, don't you remember? In your second year? I don't know how, but she was opening the Chamber of Secrets and word got out to the Ministry that she was the one responsible for all those deaths. They let Hagrid off easy the first time, but the jury said this time they couldn't do it again...with four students dead, and all. They sent her to Azkaban, that poor little girl..."

But Harry had pushed back his chair and stood up so abruptly the table slid forward and his glass was knocked over. "THEY SENT HER TO AZKABAN?"

His parents and Leila stared at him, openmouthed. "I thought you knew, Harry," Lily whispered.

"I bloody well didn't know! How could they send her to Azkaban? It wasn't her fault!"

"Harry, what's wrong with you?" Leila said loudly. He froze, realizing how stupid he must look, yelling about something that happened years before.

"I'm not feeling well," he lied. "I need to go upstairs and lie down." And he fled the room and bounded up the stairs to his bedroom.

Ginny in Azkaban. The very picture tore at his insides. Harry flopped down on his bed and balled his fists so hard that his fingernails were cutting into his skin. The great lump in his stomach had now risen to his throat. He swallowed hard. What had happened? Had the diary been discovered at all? The Basilisk was still alive, no doubt, the diary cast away, waiting for the next unsuspecting victim to come along and write in it. But how come she hadn't been killed? Harry guessed that maybe she had been somehow caught in the act of opening the Chamber... The unwanted images of Ginny chained to that chair in the courtroom came to his mind...Ginny being dragged away by Dementors... Ginny huddled in her cell, reliving the worst memories of her life again and again...

Harry made up his mind. He was going to rescue Ginny if it cost him his life.

Chapter 3

Two hours later, there was another knock on his door. "Harry?"

Harry did not answer.

"Harry, it's me. Sirius."

Harry rolled over and pulled himself off the bed. "Come in."

The door swung open and there stood Sirius Black, looking more handsome and happy than Harry ever remembered. His hair was shoulder length and his dark eyes twinkled. There was no trace of the gaunt, roughened Sirius Harry had spent that last Christmas with at Grimmauld Place.

"Harry! It's so good to see you!"

"How are you?" Harry asked, motioning for Sirius to sit down.

"Oh, same as usual. Bored to death. Stupid job..." His godfather yawned comically.

Harry looked up, interestedly. "Where do you work again?"

"At the Ministry, remember? Department of Magical Games and Sports. But enough about me. How are you, Harry? How was your year?"

"Alright," Harry said, wishing he knew what his year *had* been like. "Same old, same old. The teachers are piling the homework on cause next year's NEWT year."

"Is that all you do? Study? Come on, pal, you've got to have a little bit of fun!"

"I suppose you mean the same kind of 'fun' you and my dad had while you were at school," Harry said wryly.

Sirius laughed. "What's the point of going through life without having any fun? You've got to bend the rules here and there."

“For a start, I’m not an Animagus and I’m not friends with a werewolf,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh, but there’s other stuff you can do without getting in too much trouble...Harry, do you like any of the girls?”

Harry was caught off guard by this. “I...uh...um, no.”

“That was the most unconvincing ‘no’ I’ve ever heard. OK, out with it. Which girl is it?”

Harry didn’t know what to say. Sirius was waiting, looking delightedly pleased as he watched Harry’s face get redder and redder. Finally Harry decided to tell the truth...or some of it, anyway. “I liked this girl, but Mum just told me today that she’s in Azkaban. I thought she was dead. I’ve never liked anyone since.”

Sirius’s face became softer, more compassionate. “Ginny Weasley.”

Harry nodded, looking away.

“Harry, I’m sure it isn’t all *that* bad,” Sirius said. “They wouldn’t be horrible to a little girl.”

“Being in Azkaban is *worse* than being dead!” Harry exclaimed. “Have you ever met a Dementor? I met...er, read about them in Defence class. They slowly suck all the happy thoughts from your mind. They drain the life and magic out of you, Sirius! And Ginny’s been there for *four years*.”

He glared at his godfather, almost daring Sirius to contradict him. Then an idea came to his mind so suddenly that he jerked up, surprised. The answer had been right here, in his room, and he hadn’t even thought of it till now.

“Sirius,” Harry said, trying to sound lighter and more convincing. “Will you do something for me?”

“Of course, mate, anything.”

“Anything?”

Sirius looked puzzled. "What do you want?"

"I want you to teach me to become an Animagus."

When Harry's mother called up the stairs that lunch was ready, Harry and Sirius hurried down. Lily Potter, Harry discovered, was a wonderful cook. Her homemade pumpkin juice was better than any the elves ever conjured up, Harry decided. James, Lily, and Sirius chatted amicably about the current events, the Quidditch World Cup coming up that autumn, the new teacher at Hogwarts (Mad-Eye was retiring, Harry discovered), and the recent Muggle attacks in London. Harry kept a keen ear on the conversation and picked up quite a bit of useful information, such as, his father played Chaser for the Oxford Otters Quidditch Team, and his mother worked as a potions scientist at the Wizarding Academic Institute three days a week. Sirius reminisced about how he had tried out for Beater after school but hadn't been good enough ("You were always the best of us at Quidditch, James") and had been finally forced to take a less exciting job at the Ministry.

After the delicious lunch, James invited Harry, Leila, and Sirius to come out and play Quidditch in the carefully cleared lot in the woods behind the house. Leila was reluctant, but she agreed in the end, and Harry scurried back upstairs to retrieve his broom. He finally found it in his closet where he had supposedly thrown it the night before after getting back from King's Cross. He was disappointed to find that it was only a Cleansweep Eleven. Changing to a pair of jogging bottoms (more comfortable for flying than jeans), Harry grabbed his broom and followed the others out of the door.

He found himself in a quiet neighbourhood, with the houses spread farther apart than those in Little Whinging, but still in sight of each other. Harry strained his eyes to read the signpost at the corner. It read, *Godric's Hollow, One Mile*.

"Come on, Harry," Sirius called, motioning for Harry to follow him around to the back of the house. Sirius had been more than willing to teach Harry how to be an Animagus, even without the prior consent of his parents. "I want it to be a surprise, and besides, it will be fun," Harry had argued. Actually, he hadn't had to do much to convince his

godfather. Sirius had pounced on the idea, and by the end of the conversation, he was more excited than Harry.

Harry followed Sirius across the back yard and into the woods. A small path twisted and finally ended in a large field surrounded by tall trees to keep the Muggles from seeing anything unusual. Large hoops stood at each end, and Sirius dropped the case of Quidditch balls in the middle of the field. James was walking around the perimeter, waving his wand and mumbling spells under his breath. "OK, Muggle-repellent charms in full swing," he finally said, jogging back to where the others were waiting to mount their brooms. "Now. Let's see...you can play Chaser with me, Leila, and Sirius can be the Beater, and Harry..."

"Can I play Seeker?" Harry said quickly. He knew it would be a dead give-away if he tried to keep. He was horrible at it.

James glanced over at him, surprised. "Seeker?" he said uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

"I...uh...I've been practicing seeking in my free time at school," Harry lied.

James and Sirius looked pleased, but Leila was looking suspiciously at her brother again. Harry felt uncomfortable under her gaze, and quickly mounted his broom.

"So we'll just forget beating and Sirius can play Keeper," James decided.

"Damn," Sirius mumbled. James laughed. "Awww, come off it, Sirius! You're great at keeping."

"Not against you and Leila," Sirius said. "Anyways, here goes nothing."

He released the balls. Harry caught a glimpse of the Golden Snitch before it disappeared from sight. He soared upward to begin his search, while Leila and James waited for Sirius to fly up to the goal posts before beginning their onslaught.

Harry watched, spellbound. His dad was the best chaser he'd ever seen. All the rumours of his father's Quidditch skills were true. And Leila wasn't far behind her father; obviously she had learned from the best. Harry circled high above the three below, watching his dad and sister move in and out of range, passing the ball back and forth with the fluidity of dancers. They seemed to be able to read each other's thoughts. Slowly they moved closer and closer, and headed in for the shot. Sirius was hovering near the right goal as James shot forward, Quaffle raised, ready to score. But at the last moment Harry's dad flung the ball to Leila who shot it through the left goal instead.

"And ten points for Prongs and Daughter!" James shouted wildly as Sirius scowled. "I'll tell you what," James continued. "If Harry can catch the Snitch before we score fifteen goals on you, you and Harry win."

Sirius merely replied by throwing the Quaffle clear to the other end of the field, and Leila raced to retrieve it.

James and Leila scored once again, and Sirius blocked one of James's goals, before Sirius looked up at Harry and saw him watching. "Get busy and look for the Snitch," Sirius yelled, just barely blocking the Quaffle Leila had thrown at the centre goal.

"Sorry," Harry shouted, and he began circling the field, keeping his eyes craned for the tiny flash of gold.

The game continued below him in even more intensity. Sirius blocked another goal, but then Leila and James scored three more, bringing up the score to 50/0. Harry circled higher, then lower. Once he thought he saw a flash near his father, but then realized it was only James's glasses reflecting in the bright summer sun. James and Leila now had 70 points, 90 points, 100 points...Harry was now searching for the snitch with fervour. Sirius was flying more recklessly now; he did make some truly spectacular saves, but he was no match for Leila and James.

110 points...130 points...and then he saw it. The Snitch was hovering at the very bottom of the middle goal post. Harry closed in fast, then realized that the only way to avoid the intense game below was to

dive from directly above the Snitch. He wheeled his broom around, and pointed it downward.

His stomach flip-flopped as the broom plummeted. The ground was racing closer...he was stretching out his hand...and with an powerful feeling of joy he felt his hand close around the cool surface of the snitch. Harry pulled his broom up sharply. If he had been riding his Firebolt he would have been fine, but the Cleansweep didn't respond as well, and Harry crashed into the ground.

The world was spinning. He was seeing stars...his elbow was aching painfully...

"Harry! Are you alright?"

Harry pushed himself up into a sitting position and opened his eyes. Sirius, James, and Leila were crowded around him—James, looking worried, Sirius, exuberant, and Leila, astonished.

"I'm fine!" he assured them, and held up his hand, clutching the Snitch.

Sirius pulled him to his feet. "That was incredible!" he cried, a wide grin spreading across his handsome face. "Did you see that, James? Perfect Wronski Feint! Victor Krum couldn't have done it better. Merlin's beard, you have been practicing, boy!" His godfather slapped him on the back. "And Harry Potter and Padfoot win!"

"Where did you learn that?" James said incredulously.

Harry shrugged, embarrassed. "I guess I'm just a natural. I think I'll try out for Seeker next year. It's loads more fun than playing Keeper."

Leila said nothing all afternoon as they played several more games. Twice, she and James reached 150 points before Harry found the Snitch, but he and Sirius won the other four games.

Sirius was jubilant. He couldn't stop talking about the Wronski Feint all the way back to the house. Leila was still silent. Harry couldn't decide if she was just sullen, or if she had guessed there was

something strange going on with her older brother. He did notice, though, that she kept shooting strange glances in his direction.

After supper that evening, Sirius pulled Harry aside. "I'll come by in the morning," he said, an edge of enthusiasm in his voice. "I've told your parents you wanted help revising for Transfiguration N.E.W.T.'s, and they agreed to let me take you over to my house in Camden Town for a few hours every day. I think with my help you could be an Animagus by the end of the summer! I've even got a few books on it." Harry nodded, thrilled that his plan was beginning to work so quickly. "So, see you at nine?"

"Yeah. Yeah, see you in the morning," said Harry, and he watched Sirius say his farewells to Lily and James, then step outside and disappear.

Harry was awakened the next morning by the crash of an owl flying into his bedroom window. "Whaaaaa..." he slurred, squinting miserably against the bright morning sunlight. He reached for his glasses, which he had carefully placed on the right side of the bed the night before, and shoved them up onto the bridge of his nose. A tawny owl was pecking impatiently at the glass. Harry jumped up and stumbled over to the window, throwing it open. Who could possibly be sending him a letter?

The tawny owl hopped in, and held out its leg, to which was attached a rolled up parchment. Harry took the letter, and the bird blinked at him with large brown eyes and cocked its head as if to ask, "Well, can I go or not?"

"Hang on," Harry told the owl, "and wait till I know whether I'll need to send a message back or not."

He sat back down on his bed and undid the string on the parchment.

Dear Harry, it read. I need to talk to you, soon. I've already owled Lily and James about coming over tomorrow afternoon. Something has happened. – Remus Lupin

Chapter 4

At ten-o'clock sharp, the doorbell rang and Sirius stepped inside.

"Got your Transfiguration book ready?" he said jovially.

Harry felt stupid; he had left it upstairs. "Uh...I'll be right back."

Harry dashed around his room, looking for his schoolbooks. He finally found them stowed away in his closet, the obvious reason being so he could forget about any kind of schoolwork for the summer. Finally he found *Advanced Transfiguration* and dashed back down the stairway.

Sirius was in the kitchen. He had begged some croissants and jam off of Lily, and was now trying to tell James a story with a full mouth.

"...and I said to her, 'Why don't we go and have a Firewhisky at the Hog's Head, sweet?' But she just gave me a nasty glare and said, 'Howard always took me to the HH Gourmet in London. The Hog's Head is for wizarding scum...'" Sirius gave a girly outraged snort that sent Lily and James into peals of laughter.

"Sirius," Lily panted. "We really need to get you a proper girlfriend. You have no taste!"

Sirius scowled. "Not like I can help it...I didn't get a chance to date *anyone* at Hogwarts, with the Marauders breathing down my back all the time."

"That's a lie, and you know it," Lily countered. "I seem to remember catching you snogging more than one girl in broom closets when I was a prefect. Was that Rita Skeeter you were snogging in your 6th year? You hexed me before I could get a good look..."

Harry bit back a laugh. Sirius and...*Rita Skeeter*?

Sirius snorted. "Not like you and James were innocent either. I know what the two of you did in your free time under James's invisibility cloak!"

Lily grinned wolfishly up at James, stroking one finger over his chin. "I must say, I picked the best Marauder, didn't I?"

"Watch it, Evans," James laughed. "If I remember correctly you weren't too keen on me at first. Took you long enough to come around..."

"You were too busy hexing everyone in sight to even think about girls," she said coolly.

"Ha! You just ignored me because you knew it would make me even more riled."

"I think deep down inside you always liked James...must have been his good looks, 'cause it definitely wasn't his charm," Sirius teased slyly, and Lily didn't even blush as she pulled her husband down for a deep kiss.

Harry cleared his throat. Sirius looked up, but his parents were still glued to each other. "Let's get going, Harry," Sirius said in a stage whisper, "before these two start going at it like bunnies..."

Harry's face was bright red as Sirius hustled him out of the house.

Sirius insisted on side-along apparition, even though Harry assured him that he was perfectly capable of disapparating by himself. "But you're not 17 yet," Sirius had said firmly, and that had been that. Harry was beginning to miss the old Sirius, who would have not only let him apparate by himself, but would have been the first to suggest it. He wondered why Sirius had agreed to teach him to be an Animagus.

Harry landed in the square gasping for breath. He felt sure he'd never get used to the horrible sensation of Apparation. "Come on," Sirius said, striding over towards the rows of shabby houses. He stopped right between number eleven and number thirteen. "What are you waiting for?"

Harry was staring at the houses. He couldn't see number twelve. "Is your house under the Fidelius Charm, Sirius? I can't see it."

“Oh, right.” Sirius dug around in his pocket and pulled out a worn piece of parchment. Harry took it, and read: *Sirius’s house is found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.* The spidery handwriting was faded, but Harry recognized it. He had seen it once before...on the Marauder’s Map.

“Is my dad your Secret-Keeper?” Harry asked.

“Of course he is. Wouldn’t have asked anyone else.”

Harry followed Sirius into the hallway. It was very different now. The Grimmauld Place Harry remembered had been much more gloomy, dirty, and depressing. Now light streamed in from magical windows lining the once dark hallway. Harry noticed that the dingy wooden floors had been replaced with carpet, and the house elves’ heads and the ugly portraits were missing. Two long brightly coloured tapestries hung over where the portrait of Mrs. Black had been in the Grimmauld Place Harry knew.

“Sirius,” Harry said, “what happened to your mum?”

Sirius laughed. “You have to see this,” he said, and pulled back the tapestries. There stood the life-size portrait of a livid old woman—with a gag in her mouth.

“Your mum is a genius,” Sirius explained. “After I inherited this house she and James helped me move in and fix this place up. She tried to undo the Permanent Sticking Charm, but failed, so she just conjured up a gag. She did the decorating around here too.”

“This is brilliant!” Harry said, looking out one of the magical windows that displayed a peaceful lake with a mountain background. On the far side of the lake was a tall castle that Harry recognized. “Hey, this is Hogwarts!”

“Another one of your mum’s brilliant ideas. Come on, we’ve only got a few hours. I’ve set up some stuff in the living room.”

Harry followed his godfather into the sitting room. He hardly recognized the place. Two couches and an armchair were arranged

tastefully around a fireplace. An upright mirror stood in the centre of the room.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Sirius invited, and Harry took a seat in the armchair as Sirius flopped down on the couch.

Harry waited, nervously. He wondered if becoming an Animagus hurt at all, and how long it would take. Sirius seemed to read his thoughts.

“Don’t worry, Harry, you’ll learn quickly. You’ve got a proper teacher. You should have seen some of the fixes James and I got ourselves into when we were trying to learn. Once he sprouted antlers and I grew a tail, and we couldn’t figure out how to reverse the process. We had to go to Madame Pomfrey with stories about Zonko’s joke sweets that malfunctioned. I think she knew the truth, but to her credit, I don’t think she ever told a soul. Now,” Sirius said, standing up and shoving a stack of books into Harry’s arms, “you’ll want to read these.”

Harry glanced at a few of the covers. The books had titles like, *Discovering the Animal Inside of You*, *Becoming an Animagus in Ten Easy Steps*, and *Animagi and Their Secrets*.

“Won’t my parents suspect something if they see me reading these books?” he asked.

“I’ve charmed them so they look like Transfiguration books if anyone besides you or I look at them. Oh, another thing. Have you decided what animal you’d like to become?”

Harry honestly hadn’t given it a thought. “Um...”

“That’s OK,” Sirius said quickly. “I just wondered. You should start thinking about it now, though. Read that first book” and he pointed to *Discovering the Animal Inside of You*, “and you’ll find at the back an evaluation survey that helps you find out which animals you relate to best. And don’t worry if you decide on an animal and then later change your mind. Did you know James was going to be a falcon at first? I was even considering becoming a bear. But I think we’ll both agree, a stag fit your father much better than a falcon, and I was much better as a dog. Really, Harry, you don’t choose your animal, the animal chooses you.”

“Right,” said Harry, who was already making mental lists of animals he wanted to read up about.

“First things first,” Sirius continued. “Have you ever changed any part of your body before without using a wand or potion? Either accidentally or when you were meaning too?”

Harry considered this. “I don’t think so... Wait, there was one time when I was living with the Dur...uh, my mum gave me a haircut and I hated it,” he improvised quickly. “I brooded about my hair all night long and when I woke up it was long again.”

Sirius looked delighted. “Wonderful! Then this should be easy for you. Most wizards can’t change their hair when they’re thinking about it, but you did it accidentally. Alright, Harry, I want you to stand in front of the mirror, and look at your hair.”

“My *hair*?”

“Yes. Stare at it, contemplate it, memorise it. Every lock, every wave, every strand. Just watch your hair for ten minutes.”

Harry stood and looked into the mirror, feeling stupid and embarrassingly vain to be looking at his own hair for such a long period of time.

Minutes passed. Finally when Harry felt he was going to die of boredom if he had to contemplate his hair one more moment, Sirius said, “Now close your eyes and imagine that your hair is red. Think really hard about it and feel your hair changing colours.”

Harry did. Finally he opened his eyes. To his horror, his hair was an odd shade of orange-pink with huge black sections here and there. Sirius laughed. “Good, Harry, good. It’s definitely a different colour. Now change it back.”

Harry practiced changing his hair color all morning long. By the middle of the morning, he had achieved a shade of red any Weasley would have been proud of. By one-o’-clock, he could change his hair to almost any color he desired, including blonde, brown, auburn, silver, white, and even more vivid colors like purple, pink, and blue.

As Harry turned his hair pink one last time, he thought of Tonks, and grinned as he imagined what she'd have to say about his hair. Then he sobered, remembering that if this wasn't all just a dream, he would never see her again.

"I'd say that's enough for today," Sirius said. "Start reading those books I gave you and practice what you learned this morning until you can do it almost instantaneously. Speed is what we're looking for. Oh, and think about what animal you want to become."

He apparated Harry back to Godric's Hollow. "So, see you tomorrow, same time?" Harry asked, one hand on the door knob.

"You bet," Sirius said. "See you tomorrow." And he disappeared with a pop.

Harry turned, and swung open the door to his house. It was surprisingly quiet. He dumped his stack of books on the bottom stair and ventured into the kitchen feeling ravenously hungry. Leila was there, making herself a sandwich.

"Where are Mum and Dad?"

"Dad's at work, and Mum went grocery shopping," Leila said without glancing up from the bread on which she was spreading mayonnaise. "So did you have a good time with Sirius?"

"Um..." said Harry. "I guess so. I mean, how much fun can revising be?"

She whirled around, her eyes narrowed. "How come you're suddenly all concerned about your grades anyway? You seemed happy enough with the A you got on your Transfiguration O.W.L. last summer."

Harry decided to tell the truth, or at least part of it. "McGonagall says I have to get at least an E on the Transfiguration N.E.W.T if I want to become an Auror."

“An *Auror*? Since when did you want to become an Auror?” Leila exclaimed. “Last year you said you were going to try out for professional Quidditch just like Dad!”

Harry stared at her. He wanted to play Quidditch for a living? “Uh, I’ve been considering it for awhile,” he improvised. “We had career meetings last year and when McGonagall asked me what I wanted to do, I told her I wanted to be an Auror. I’m not very good at Keeping, anyway.”

Leila glared at him suspiciously. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but she closed it again. Grabbing her sandwich and a bottle of juice, she stomped out of the kitchen. Harry could hear her progress up the stairs and he winced as her door slammed.

I’ve got to be more careful, he decided as he opened the refrigerator door.

Chapter 5

Sirius dropped Harry off at Godric's Hollow the next day around one. His godfather had been very pleased with the speed at which Harry was now able to change his hair colour, and had decided that Harry could begin working on something else. Harry had spent the morning growing and un-growing his hair. Sirius had suggested teasingly that Harry go home with waist-long hair just to see his mum's reaction.

The next two hours passed slowly in the quiet house as Harry waited impatiently for Lupin to come. James was at Oxford again, and Lily at the Institute. Harry didn't know where Leila was, but guessed that she was probably in her room on the telephone again. At first, Harry had been surprised to find a telephone in a wizarding household, but then it hit him—his mum was from a Muggle family; of course it would only be natural for her to have some Muggle appliances around. As Harry explored more of the house, he found quite a variety of both Muggle and wizarding items. Besides the refrigerator Harry had eaten lunch out of the day before, Lily had a microwave as well as a Muggle stove, but neither were plugged into any kind of outlet. Harry's guess was that they all ran on some type of magical current.

At three, the doorbell rang. Harry, who had finally retreated to his room to pace, jumped up, but Leila's footsteps were already pounding down the stairs. Harry raced down the hall and skidded to a stop at the top of the stairs.

"Uncle Remus!" Leila squealed. She pulled the door open wide and Remus Lupin stepped inside.

His clothes were as worn as ever, and he looked exhausted. There were even more lines in his face than Harry remembered, but Lupin gave Leila a cheery smile as he shut the door behind him.

"Professor Lupin," Harry said, and he took two steps down, then stopped. Lupin was looking at Harry, a strange expression on his face. His eyes flicked up and lingered for just a moment on Harry's scarless forehead. And in that instant, Harry knew without a shadow of doubt...

“Professor,” he said again, taking another step. Lupin seemed to wake from a trance. “Hello, Harry. Leila, it’s good to see you too, but could you give me a few minutes alone with Harry?”

Leila nodded slowly, and darted back up the stairs. “*Professor?*” she hissed as she passed Harry. “What’s that, your new nickname?”

Harry didn’t move until he heard Leila’s door slam. “Professor Lupin,” he said a third time, taking the last few steps slowly, tentatively. Lupin suddenly looked very old.

“Harry, we have many things to sort out and many questions to answer, but this is not the place. Might we make use of your sitting room?” Harry nodded numbly, and led the way into the next room. He sat down on the edge of a plump armchair, and Lupin took a seat on the couch.

There was a long moment of awkward silence. “Professor, do you...” Harry began, but Lupin cut him off. “I think you should just call me Remus, Harry. First, because it appears that I have never taught at Hogwarts, now will I be teaching anytime soon. Secondly, because I am assuming you have not told your parents what you and I know—that only two days ago they were dead, it would be best if you try to avoid any suspicious actions and calling me ‘Professor’ definitely falls into that category.”

Harry nodded.

“So,” Lupin said, “our next task is to work out how this change in realities came to be. Please tell me exactly what you were thinking as you went to bed your first night at your aunt and uncle’s house.”

“I was thinking about my mum and dad,” Harry said quietly. “I was wishing they were still alive.”

Lupin sighed. “As was I. In fact, I was thinking about Sirius as well, as I’m sure you were too. They were my last waking thought. I’m not positive about this theory, Harry, but I think our wishes, bolstered by strong feelings of longing, formed some kind of magical connection so powerful that we were able to change the past.”

Harry gaped at him. "How is that possible?"

Lupin shook his head. "I'm not sure. It's just a theory, but I am quite certain it is true. There is a name for such a phenomenon—I read about it in my seventh year at Hogwarts. It's called an *Aperio*. There is only one hole in my reasoning, though, and it is because two people's memories and wishes alone could not change reality like this. At least three magical people would have to be involved to make a change as large as this. Which means..."

"...there's someone out there from our world," Harry finished.

"Exactly. As to the identity of this third person, I have no idea. But if we are to right this wrong, Harry, it is essential that we find him or her."

"Right the wrong?" Harry exclaimed. "What wrong? My parents are *alive*! Sirius never went to Azkaban and Bellatrix never killed him in the Ministry! I'll even bet Cedric Diggory is still alive! Why would we ever want to change things back? This is much better than the old reality!"

"You have every right to believe that," Lupin said sadly. "But think. What has changed about this world? Why are your parents still alive?"

"Cause Voldemort never had a reason to kill me."

"Ahhh. I assume you're referring to the prophecy about you and Voldemort."

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked, surprised.

Lupin's mouth twitched. "Harry, I may be many things, but I am not stupid. I put the pieces together. A mysterious prophecy that Voldemort wants so badly he will take any measure to obtain it its contents, the rumors about the Chosen One circulating, Dumbledore's long absences and private lessons with you, your trip the night he died... There is only one explanation for all this: You are indeed the Chosen One, the only person who can defeat Lord Voldemort, and Dumbledore knew this and was preparing you by

imparting to you some of his vast amounts of knowledge, including his theory on why Lord Voldemort is apparently immortal.”

Harry was impressed. Lupin had got it all right. It was time to let Lupin in on the rest of the information.

“Yeah, well, he’s not immortal yet,” Harry said flatly. “And he never will be if I can help it.”

Lupin said nothing as Harry explained about Lord Voldemort’s Horcruxes, the ones Harry and Dumbledore had found and destroyed, Dumbledore’s theories about the remaining Horcruxes, and the locket that turned out to be a fake with a mysterious message left inside.

When Harry had finished, Lupin nodded. “That explains a lot. Seven Horcruxes...” The older man shuddered. “Only Voldemort would do something evil, so perverted. But Harry, have you thought of how you are to destroy the Horcruxes despite these new circumstances we are under? I am assuming that now you have neither Mr. Weasley nor Miss Granger to assist you.”

Harry had not thought about this. “Unless one of them was the third person in this *Aperio* thing,” he suggested hopefully. It was really discouraging to think that his friends of six years might not recognize nor remember him.

Lupin shook his head. “I doubt it. Only one who can really feel the loss can participate in such a strong bond of magic. Neither Ron nor Hermione knew Lily, James, and Sirius like I did, or had the connection with the three that you did. But I repeat my question. What are you going to do?”

“Do?” Harry said blankly.

“You and I are now the only people in this world with the knowledge to defeat Lord Voldemort.”

“But I’m not the Chosen One anymore.”

Lupin looked like he just wanted to shake Harry hard. "Don't you understand? You may not be the Chosen One in this world, but you still are the Chosen One in the other world."

"But there is no prophecy here. My scar's gone. My mum and dad aren't dead anymore, or Sirius. Everything's how it should be."

"How it should be?" Is that how you describe this world? Think, Harry. The people are defeated and defenceless. They believe there is nothing more they can do to stop Lord Voldemort. Yes, maybe your mum and dad are still alive in this world, but Lord Voldemort still murdered them. You and I know that. He murdered them in cold blood, as he murdered Cedric Diggory. Sirius actually did die in the ministry."

"But..."

"Harry, LISTEN TO ME! You think you're going to just live a nice life now that your parents are back. YOU CAN'T DO THAT! No, they're not dead...yet. Do you honestly think once Voldemort has completed his plans for this country that there will be a single person left alive who ever resisted him? He'll kill your mum and dad, Harry. He'll kill them again. It may not be today, or tomorrow, but it will happen. And no one's doing anything to prevent it. No one can...except for you."

"Think of the grief and pain Voldemort's already caused in this world. Think of the people he's killed: Arabella Figg. Dedalus Diggle, Sturgis Podmore, Hagrid, Charlie Weasley, Tonks..." Lupin's voice broke.

"He's the reason Ginny's in Azkaban," Harry whispered.

Lupin looked up and met Harry's eyes. In that instant, Harry knew that Lupin understood the empty ache inside his chest.

Harry felt the heavy weight of the Horcruxes that he had been so glad to be rid of the past few days settle back down on his shoulders. "What should I do?" he said. "I don't even know where to start. Hermione was the brains of the operation. I'll bet she would have had the Ravenclaw or Gryffindor Horcrux figured out by now, not to mention having a whole profile sketch of R.A.B."

Lupin straightened up. "There is something we can do. But it involves getting more people involved. It may be risky too."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked, wondering what Lupin had in mind.

Lupin looked him straight in the face. "Re-form the Order of the Phoenix.

Chapter 6

The Order of the Phoenix invitation came the next morning at breakfast. Harry, James, and Lily were sitting around the table eating pancakes. Leila was nowhere to be seen; Harry guessed she was still sleeping. He had always wondered how Order members were alerted to the times of meetings and such, and he found out when halfway through the meal a little blue box on the wall began to flash and beep. James and Lily looked at each other, apparently puzzled.

"It's the Order," Lily said softly.

James jumped up and touched the box. The lights and noise stopped, and a piece of parchment flew out. Harry's dad caught it. "Another Order meeting," he said, scanning the parchment quickly and handing it to Lily. "This evening. I'll have to tell Gregory that tonight won't work..."

But Lily was staring at the parchment, her eyes wide. "James," she said hoarsely. "Look. It's addressed to James, Lily, and *Harry Potter*!"

"Let me see," James demanded, snatching up the parchment and scrutinizing it. "It does say Harry's name," he confirmed. Both parents turned inquiring eyes toward Harry.

"Well?" Lily said, her eyebrows raised. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Harry shrank under their angry glares, but he had an answer ready. "Lupin talked to me yesterday about joining the Order. He said he wanted me to decide on my own without pressure from either of you, so he told me the risks, and I decided to join."

"I'm going to kill Remus Lupin," Lily hissed. "I can't believe he would go behind our backs! You're not even seventeen yet, and you've still got another year of school."

"I'll be seventeen in a couple of weeks," Harry countered.

"But you're still in school," Lily repeated. "James, back me up!"

James looked up from the parchment. "What?"

"Harry can't join the Order! He's too young."

"Lupin's right, Lily. Harry will be of age in a few weeks. If I remember correctly, you and I got married right after school, and we were seventeen when we joined the Order."

"Lupin said he'd heard about my skills in Defence Class," Harry said.

Both parents looked at him again. "Defence Class?" James said blankly. "But you got an A on your O.W.L."

"Um...I've got a lot better," Harry said. "Moody taught me a lot this year. I can even make a corporeal Patronus," he added as an afterthought, hoping that bit of information was enough to back up his story.

James looked impressed. "Really? That's very advanced magic, Harry. What form does your Patronus take?"

Harry grinned, remembering the night he and Hermione had set Sirius free, and he had defended Hermione, Sirius, and himself from a hundred Dementors with his Patronus. "A stag."

James beamed. "I'm honoured. But," he said, staring back down at the letter, "I still can't figure out why we're having another meeting. We disbanded almost a year ago."

"Lupin said he has some new information," Harry said quickly. "He didn't tell me what it was, but he has been doing some research over the last year and has come up with some stuff we ought to know about Lord Voldemort."

His parents winced slightly, but James nodded. "All right. If Lupin thinks you're old enough, who am I to stop you?"

"James!" Lily shrieked. "You aren't going to let him, are you?"

"Yes, I am," James said firmly.

Lily looked from James, to Harry, and back again. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally she looked away, tears filling her eyes. "It's really dangerous though..." Her voice broke. She finally sighed and said, "I'm sorry Harry, you must think I'm an old hag to be so protective when you're almost seventeen and all. I just don't know what I'd do if you got...hurt or killed..."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "It's OK, Mum," he said. And it was. He knew a little of what she was feeling. He had seen the same mother-bear-defending-her-cubs mindset in Mrs. Weasley, and had felt the same protectiveness himself over Ginny.

James gathered his wife into his arms. "Lily, we knew there would be risks when we joined. But it's worth it, if we can do anything to stop You-Know-Who. Besides, Harry won't be sent on any dangerous missions or anything. He's still in school, after all."

Harry wondered what they'd say when they found out he was planning on helping in the Horcrux hunt.

Lily smiled through her tears. "My little baby, all grown up," she murmured, as she pulled Harry into a hug and stroked his hair.

"Lily, let the poor fellow go before you strangle him," James said, grinning at Harry behind Lily's back.

Lily released him. "What time is the meeting tonight?" she sighed.

"Seven, at Sirius's place," said James.

At seven sharp, Harry and his parents apparated into the square near Grimmauld Place. His parents had dressed in Muggle attire, and as they made their way toward number twelve, Harry saw a few other witches and wizards trying not to look conspicuous as they approached the house.

Harry saw Sirius standing at the door, and as each person approached, he said something and the newcomer said something back. Harry wondered if the Order had a password for meetings.

Sirius grinned as James, Lily, and Harry approached the door. "OK, James...What trick did we play on Snivellus in our fourth year in Potions class right after Christmas?"

"We Vanished the contents of his cauldron before he could take a sample to Slughorn," James replied promptly.

Lily scowled. "You Marauders were so cruel," she began, but Sirius held up his hand.

"Don't speak too quickly, Lily. The next question's for you. What hex did you use on James after he asked you out the first time in our fifth year?"

Lily turned scarlet. "Honestly, Sirius! You pick the worst questions," she said.

"Just give the answer."

"Bat-Bogey Hex," she whispered, looking mortified.

James and Sirius laughed heartily, and Harry grinned. It was amazing how much his mum reminded him of Ginny sometimes. Ginny. The name left a lump in his throat as he tried not to imagine what she must be going through right now in Azkaban...

"And Harry," Sirius said, breaking into his thoughts. "What Transfiguration spell did we study this morning?"

Harry looked up quickly, and Sirius winked at him.

"We studied Partial Vanishing spells," Harry said, giving the agreed upon answer, and Sirius swung the door wide open.

Sirius's house was full of people. Harry recognized many of them as members of the Order he had known. Harry saw glimpses of Professor McGonagall, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, Emmeline Vance, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Elphias Doge, Arthur and Molly Weasley, and Bill. McGonagall was talking to a tall stern woman wearing a decorative hat that Harry recognized as Neville Longbottom's grandmother, Augusta Longbottom. A witch and wizard with round

faces were having a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and with a shock Harry realized who they were—Frank and Alice Longbottom. He had seen them once before in St. Mungo's. In this world they must not have been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange.

There were also many faces he did not recognize. A young black witch with beaded braids was chatting with Bill Weasley, and two older wizards with dark hair were talking earnestly with Mad-Eye Moody.

Suddenly Harry felt someone punch his shoulder. "Hiya, Harry," said Fred Weasley, and in the background Harry saw George bounding over.

"So you're joining up too, are you?" said George.

"I didn't know you two were in the Order," Harry said, looking the twins over. They were thinner than he'd remembered, and though they gave the impression of being carefree, Harry could see that some of the life had gone out of their eyes.

"Yeah, we joined up as soon as we finished at Hogwarts," George explained.

"Mum nearly had kittens..." said Fred.

"...but we told her we didn't care," said George fiercely. "Anything to fight against You-Know-Who."

Harry nodded. He knew the feeling. "Is Ron here?" he inquired, suddenly realizing that Ron was seventeen; maybe he would be joining the Order too.

Fred and George gave each other knowing glances. "We understand, mate. Don't worry, he's not here; you're safe," said George.

Harry looked at him, completely confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to act like it never happened in front of us," said Fred, winking. "We know all about it. And honestly, we don't blame you."

"Blame me for what?" Harry said, nonplussed.

Fred and George grinned. "For going out with Cho when she ditched Ron for you, of course. We know it wasn't your fault she liked you better than our little brother."

"Oh, that," Harry said, trying not to look as bewildered as he felt. "I'd almost forgotten."

They laughed. "I'd want to forget that Slug-vomiting Charm he hit you with too," said George.

"Well," said Harry, not sure what to say, but fortunately the twins decided to change the subject.

"So," said Fred. "Any idea what this meeting's about?"

"I guess we'll find out soon," said George. "Here comes Sirius."

Sirius entered the packed living room carrying several more chairs, but there was no way everyone was going to fit. "Lily," he called. "Can't you do something?"

Harry watched his mum nod and pull out her wand. She walked around the perimeter of the room, muttering spells under her breath. When she had completed her circuit she suddenly flicked her wand up, and to Harry's surprise the walls began to move. The room was growing.

"Thanks a million, Lily," Sirius called across the much larger living room. He placed the chairs next to the couch, and shouted, "People! Find a seat, please, so we can start!"

There was a lot of shuffling and noise, but at last everyone had found or conjured up a chair and pulled it up into a large circle. Remus Lupin stood next to the fireplace and waited for the noise to abate.

"Welcome," he finally said. "It is wonderful to see all of you again. It's been ten months since our last Order meeting, and last time we had decided to disband and cease our somewhat subversive activities."

A murmur spread across the room. Harry thought he heard one wizard near him mutter, "So why are we meeting now?"

Lupin smiled faintly. "I have called this meeting because..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the doorbell rang. Sirius jumped up. "Probably just a latecomer," he said. "I'll get it."

"I have called this meeting," Lupin continued when Sirius had gone, "because of recent information I have discovered. It is information on how Lord Voldemort..." A few people gasped. "...can be..."

But at that moment, Sirius appeared in the doorway followed by a thin man with a sharp nose, thin, colourless hair, and small watery eyes. Lupin's words died in his throat.

Harry stared at the newcomer in disbelief. A quick glance at Lupin showed that his former teacher was frozen with shock as well.

The man raised one hand and gave a little wave. "Hi everyone, sorry for being late--what did I miss?" said Peter Pettigrew.

Chapter 7

Harry stared at Peter Pettigrew, the man responsible for his parents' deaths. *But*, a little voice in his head said rationally, *your parents are alive. Peter never betrayed them over to the Dark Lord in this reality.*

But what if he's a Death Eater? He was one before the Prophecy was made... said another, more cautious voice.

Harry glanced at Lupin, who seemed to be thinking quickly. Harry hoped Lupin had remembered that Pettigrew might still be under the service of Lord Voldemort. If Pettigrew learned about the Horcruxes and the plans to destroy the pieces of Voldemort's soul... If he took the information back to his master, everything would be ruined. Voldemort would undoubtedly hide his Horcruxes in places no one would ever be able to find them, and take measures to murder anyone who could possibly ever have learned of the Horcruxes, thus destroying all possibilities that someone might ever defeat him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Lupin's wand move an inch. Suddenly he heard Lupin's voice whispering in his ear. "Don't say anything. I'll take care of this. Pettigrew will not find out about the Horcruxes."

Harry jumped a little, startled. No one else around him seemed to have heard the message. He looked over at Lupin, and the older man nodded.

"You haven't missed anything, Peter," Sirius was saying pleasantly. "Have a seat. Remus was just about to tell us why he called this meeting."

Lupin cleared his throat. "Well, I've been thinking a lot over the last few months, and I've come to the conclusion that we should re-form the Order of the Phoenix."

"For what purpose?" Frank Longbottom said loudly.

"There's no point," said a grey-haired witch Harry did not recognize. "We'll just get ourselves all killed."

"We failed. There's nothing else we can do against You-Know-Who," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, his shoulders slumped.

Lupin shook his head. "I refuse to believe that. I have not been idle in my ten months of absence. I have been studying, planning, and thinking. I believe I have come up with some plans that may effectively pose a threat to Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

Harry noticed that Lupin's gaze paused slightly on Peter Pettigrew as Lupin uttered the last words.

"What kind of plans are you thinking of?" Minerva McGonagall said, her eyebrows raised.

Lupin shook his head. "I will not divulge them all tonight. They need some work, some more thought, before I share them with you. I will only say that I am certain my tactics will be more successful than our last endeavours."

"Why should we start the Order up again when you won't even tell us your plans?" said Arthur Weasley. Harry noticed huge dark circles under his eyes.

"I'm not asking you to reform the Order simply because I say so, nor because I have plans," Lupin said quietly.

"Then why?" James Potter asked, a hard edge in his voice.

Lupin looked him straight in the face. "Think, James. Think for just a moment about what Lord Voldemort has done to your family. How your parents were brutally murdered one night. Lily, I believe your parents were killed too, simply out of spite, simply because they were Muggles." Lupin stood, and began pacing. "And Molly..." Mrs. Weasley gave a choked sob. "...Think of how Voldemort has ripped your family apart. Your brothers died in the first war, your son is dead, along with his fiancée. Your daughter... I know for a fact that it is Lord Voldemort's fault that she is in Azkaban."

Several people gasped, and began to whisper, but Lupin paid them no heed. "You, Kingsley. How did your wife die? It was a Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley, wasn't it? Minerva, how did you become

Headmistress of Hogwarts? Because Dumbledore gave his *life* to the cause of stopping the evil of Lord Voldemort. Alice, didn't you once have several brothers? What happened to them? They died because of Voldemort. Kiara," Lupin said, addressing the young black witch with braids. "Why are you an orphan?"

"Voldemort murdered my mum and dad," she said, lifting her chin.

"That's right. Say the name," Lupin encouraged. "If we fear the name, we will fear Voldemort so much that it will take away our will to fight, our will to right the wrongs that have been done. What about you, Bill? Weren't you dating that French girl, Fleur? What happened to her?"

"She died in another Death Eater attack," Bill said softly.

"Amelia, wasn't that your brother who died in the first war? Moody, you've lost your sister, and your wife, haven't you? Think of the people who should be sitting here in this room right now! Hestia Jones. Dedalus Diggle. Tonks, Charlie, Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Edgar Bones, Dorcas Meadowes, Hagrid, Arabella Figg, Dumbledore himself, and the list could go on and on. What happened to them? They got in the way of Lord Voldemort."

Harry watched in awe. The room was completely silent, every eye on Lupin; the members sat, spellbound. Several witches were wiping tears from their eyes. Molly Weasley was now crying freely onto Alice Longbottom's shoulder.

"The Ministry is completely under the control of Voldemort. Hogwarts will be soon. Already the Muggle-borns have been almost exterminated. Soon Voldemort will set his plans into place to cleanse the wizarding race from anyone with any Muggle blood. Pure blood will dominate.

"Think about it. You may feel that the safest path to take is passive. Sit at home. Protect yourself with the spells. You may postpone your death a few years, but do you honestly think that Voldemort doesn't know all about the Order? He has eyes and ears everywhere—in the Ministry, in Hogwarts... You will never be safe anywhere. I don't care

if you move to South America; Lord Voldemort will still be a danger. As long as he is in power, no one is safe.”

Lupin stopped pacing. “That is why we must fight. We must avenge the deaths of our friends and family. We must show our children that we believe in fighting for what we know to be right. As for me, I will never rest until Lord Voldemort is defeated. Even if we all die in the war, it is better than the alternative, perhaps living to the end of our days, knowing that we could have prevented many deaths if we had only resisted.

“So I have only one question for you tonight. Shall we leave behind a legacy of cowardice and fear, or of courage and bravery?”

The room was completely still and silent, save for the sniffs of the weeping women. Then a chair scraped, and Harry looked up to see Mad-Eye Moody rising slowly and magnificently from his chair.

“I call for a vote,” he growled. “Who will vote that we form the New Order of the Phoenix?”

“I will,” a weak voice said. Harry looked over and saw Mrs. Weasley, holding her hand high. She was still crying freely, but she had straightened and was looking more and more like the old Molly Weasley Harry knew so well.

“Me too,” Arthur Weasley said solemnly.

“Count me in,” said Sirius.

“I as well,” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry watched as every person in the room sombrely gave their consent. Lupin watched with the expression of one who has just won a battle, though his eyes narrowed when Peter Pettigrew pledged his loyalty to the New Order. When the final person had vocalized their consent, Lupin straightened. “We need a contract,” he said, “to make it official. If you’re really serious about fighting against Voldemort, you’ll sign.”

“I’ll get a piece of parchment,” Sirius said, and left the room, reappearing with parchment, ink, and quills. One by one the families stepped forward to sign the list. Harry scrawled his name right under his mum’s, feeling proud.

Afterwards, many people lingered, talking quietly with each other. Harry saw Lupin conferring with Sirius, and shortly after, Sirius began approaching certain people in the room and speaking to them softly.

Lupin made his way towards Harry, Lily, and James. “I’m glad you’ve decided to join us, Harry,” his former teacher said. “Lily, James, would you like to stay for tea after?” He gave Harry a meaningful glance.

“I don’t know...” Lily said doubtfully. “Leila’s all alone at home...”

“She’ll be OK,” said James. “We’d love to, Remus.”

Chapter 8

It took a half hour for all the extra members to filter out of the house. Peter Pettigrew had been one of the last to go, Harry noticed, but once Pettigrew had realized that no one else appeared to be leaving for a while, he had slipped out quietly.

"Drinks will be served in just a moment," Sirius called. "Lily, would you fix the living room?"

Harry's mother set about shrinking the room, and James began magically removing the extra chairs. Harry looked around. The remaining members staying for "tea" included Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, Bill, Professor McGonagall, Mad-Eye Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Emmeline Vance, and Harry's parents. Sirius entered with the drinks, and Lupin arranged the chairs in a smaller semicircle around the fireplace.

"Please, have a seat," Lupin said pleasantly to the remaining Order members.

Sirius passed around glasses. "There's Firewhisky, Butterbeer, Gillywater, Pumpkin Juice, Tea, Elderflower Wine, anything you want."

When each person had received his or her choice of drinks, Lupin took a sip of his tea and said, "As you have probably guessed, I have some more information to reveal. I had planned on telling the entire group, but in the end I decided it would be best to tell only a select group. These are matters of utmost importance, and I ask that you not tell a soul anything I am about to tell you."

"Why are you only telling us, not the entire group?" said Bill, looking curious.

Lupin sighed. "You do not want to hear this, but I have evidence that someone among us is a traitor."

"*What?*" James breathed. "Who?"

“Again, you are not going to want to hear this information, but it is entirely true. It is Peter.”

The room exploded. “Peter Pettigrew!”

“No.”

“It can’t be!”

“It’s a lie.”

“Remus, this is a large accusation you are making,” said McGonagall, looking shocked.

“I know,” Lupin said evenly.

“Do you have any proof?” she asked

“I do. I have my sources. I cannot reveal them, though, lest I endanger the person who is feeding me information.”

“Of what quality is this source?” Lily said skeptically.

“Let’s just say,” Lupin began carefully, “that there are Death Eaters who do not wish to be so anymore.”

Harry knew Lupin was making it all up—it had been part of their plan—but suddenly Sirius shifted uncomfortably in his seat next to Harry.

“*Death Eaters?*” Molly gasped. “Remus, you’ve been communicating with Death Eaters?”

“Please, hear me out,” Lupin said. “I have much to tell you, but you must listen until I’m done. Then you can ask questions.” He waited for their consent, then continued. “How many of you have ever heard of Horcruxes?”

Most of the members were looking at each other in confusion, but Moody gave a low growl. “Ah, Mad-Eye,” Lupin acknowledged. “Tell us what you know about the Horcrux.”

"I only know this because of some extra study I did in dark materials in Auror Training," Moody said slowly. "A Horcrux is simply a name for an object in which a person has hidden part of their soul. There is a spell for creating a Horcrux, but I do not know it. I only know that it involves murdering a person. The act splits the soul into two, and the spell deposits one piece into the object."

Molly, Lily, and Alice all gasped. "How horrible!" Frank Longbottom exclaimed, his eyes wide.

McGonagall, however, nodded grimly. "There is a reason why we do not teach our students certain dark information at Hogwarts," she said.

"It is the ultimate crime against oneself, tearing the soul into pieces," Lupin continued. "It is used to make you somewhat immortal."

"How can you be *somewhat* immortal?" said Sirius.

"When your soul is in two different places, you cannot completely die. If you are hit with the Avada Kedavra, you may appear to die, but you will not. Your bodiless spirit will remain, just a breath of the person that used to be, until you find a way to re-inhabit your Horcrux, the remaining piece of your soul, and form a new body for yourself."

"And what does this all have to do with Lord Voldemort?" said Shackbolt.

Lupin told the group about the six Horcruxes Lord Voldemort had made, and the theories on what objects they were, all from his point of view as the one who had discovered all the information. Harry listened carefully; he and Lupin had come up with a believable story the previous day of how Lupin had been doing research about Lord Voldemort, and had met the same people who had given Dumbledore information in the old reality, but Harry was still surprised about how believable Lupin made the story seem.

"What you have said makes a lot of sense," Lily admitted once he had finished his explanation, "but how do we know it is true?"

"It's the only logical answer," Moody growled. "The Horcruxes explain why Voldemort appears to be invincible, and why he did not die when Dumbledore hit him with the Avada Kedavra."

"But how do we know it's not just an elaborate theory you made up?" said Emmeline Vance quietly.

"I won't feel comfortable until I see some evidence," Frank Longbottom said, and there was a murmur of agreement from several other people.

Lupin looked at a loss for words, but suddenly Harry knew what to do. He knew what evidence they would have to bring... "He'll get proof," Harry said loudly.

Everyone stared at him, including Lupin. "He'll have proof for you, next week," Harry said again, staring intently at Lupin, trying to tell him it would be alright...

Lupin nodded. "I'll bring evidence of the Horcruxes," he said quickly.

"And of Pettigrew's loyalty?" said James.

Lupin sighed. "Like I said, I can't reveal who I received that information from, simply for protection. But there is a way..." He looked around. "Mad-Eye?"

The roughened Auror grunted.

"Have you ever had a look at Pettigrew's right forearm with your magical eye?"

"I don't usually make a practice of looking through people's clothes," Moody growled.

Several people laughed. Even Lupin had the good graces to look flustered. "No, no... Of course not, Moody. But next week, take a look when Pettigrew comes, and I am certain you will see the Dark Mark. Are the rest of you in agreement with this test?"

Several people nodded. "It is fair," said Arthur Weasley.

“Until next week, then,” said Lupin.

The meeting broke up, the members still conversing in small groups about the Horcruxes. Lupin sidled up to Harry and pressed something cold and hard into his palm. “It’s a two-way mirror,” his former teacher said in a low voice. “I’ve got the other one. I have borrowed a page from James’s book. He and Sirius once used mirrors like these to communicate at Hogwarts. This will be a much less conspicuous way for us to communicate.”

Harry nodded, thinking with a lump in his throat of the mirror Sirius had given him.

“You’d better have a good idea of how to get evidence,” Lupin said, looking hard at Harry.

“Don’t worry, I do,” Harry said, a plan already formulating in his mind. “We can...”

But at that moment James called, “Harry, we’re leaving now. Your mum is concerned about Leila being home alone.”

“I’ll talk to you over the mirror,” Harry said quickly, and Lupin nodded. Harry said goodbye to Lupin and Sirius, and followed his father out.

Chapter 9

“Harry, you’re mad!”

“Remus, it’s the only way.”

It was the following afternoon, and Harry was having a whispered conversation with Lupin via the two-way mirrors.

“It will never work.”

“Why not?” Harry asked, smirking.

“For one thing, you’re proposing that we break into Hogwarts and search for the diary. If we cannot find it in the school, we enter the Chamber of Secrets and look there, endangering ourselves with the possibility that there might be a Basilisk wanting us for lunch.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “We’re not going to *break into* Hogwarts. We’ll just ask Professor McGonagall if we can search the school. And we’ll be safe from the Basilisk; it can only come out if Voldemort calls it.”

“Stop interrupting me!” Lupin snapped. “Then if we cannot find the diary, you’re suggesting that we find that accursed cave you and Dumbledore visited on the night of his death and face the Inferi to retrieve the locket we already know to be a fake.”

“I’ll drink the potion this time,” Harry said. “Besides, we don’t know if it’s a fake. Maybe R.A.B. never learned about the Horcruxes in this world.”

“Like I said, you’re insane.”

“We have to bring back proof, don’t we? The best proof will be the diary, if we can find it. My guess is that it’s still at Hogwarts; Ginny must have been caught in the act of opening the Chamber, and she probably didn’t take the diary to Azkaban with her.”

Lupin sighed. “I don’t know, Harry.”

"We'll just apparate to Hogwarts to have a look. That's all. It can't hurt, and there's no danger. I told you, the Basilisk can only be called by Slytherin's heir. If we can't find the diary, we'll have to try the cave."

Lupin was silent for a moment. "How are you going to get out of your house? I most certainly refuse to show up on your doorstep and say, 'Excuse me, Lily and James, could I borrow your son for a day so we can search Hogwarts for Lord Voldemort's diary and perhaps venture into the Chamber of Secrets where a monstrous Basilisk lies in wait?' Your parents are suspicious enough already!"

"I'll find a way out," Harry said. "Maybe I'll just wait until they're both gone, and Leila's in her room. You know," he added, "sometimes I wonder if she ever comes out apart from eating meals. What does she do in there all day long?"

The Lupin in the mirror shook his head. "Don't even start asking me for girl advice, Harry. I cannot even begin to fathom the minds of women."

Harry laughed. "Me neither. You should try being best friends with Hermione Granger... At least I'm the only one who doesn't understand her. Ron can't either."

Lupin smiled. "If we were still in our old reality, I'd say those two fancy each other."

"Not anymore," Harry said, and told Lupin about Fred and George's story. "They said I'm Cho's boyfriend now, and she dumped Ron for me," he finished. "I guess we can forget about Ron being my best mate anymore." As he said it, he felt a pang of sadness in his chest.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lupin said. "As soon as I find the third person in the Aperio, we can fix things."

"No!" Harry said quickly. "I don't want to go back."

"And I believe it is the right thing to do, so I suppose we've met a stalemate here," Lupin said.

Suddenly Harry heard footsteps in the hallway. "I've got to go, someone's coming. I'll contact you as soon as I've figured out a way to leave without detection."

But when Harry arrived back at Godric's Hollow the next day after Animagus lessons, he still hadn't a clue as to how to leave the house without his parents finding out. He said goodbye to Sirius, entered the house, and flung himself onto the sofa, still panting for breath after Side-Along Apparition.

"I hate apparating," Harry exclaimed to no one in particular. James was reading a pile of official-looking documents, and Lily was magically cleaning the living room. Suddenly Harry realized that the living room contained an old fireplace. "Hey, Mum, can't I just Floo over to Sirius's place tomorrow?" he said hopefully.

Lily paused, looking puzzled. James looked up from the papers. "Our house hasn't been connected to the Floo Network for years," he said, giving Harry an unreadable look. "I thought you knew that."

Harry mentally kicked himself. "Yeah... right... I just... forgot," he finished lamely. Lately he'd been using that excuse a lot.

Lily was looking at him strangely too. "Harry, are you sure you're alright? You seem to be... well, forgetting things a lot."

"I'm fine, Mum," he muttered, then quickly made up an excuse to leave the room.

Leila met him on the stairs. "Where are you going?" she demanded, blocking the path.

"Upstairs. Move."

"No. Mum's right, there is something wrong with you."

"It's nothing," said Harry, avoiding his sister's gaze.

She stamped her foot, and Harry was suddenly reminded painfully of Ginny by the fierce blazing look in Leila's eyes. "There bloody well is something wrong. You used to talk to me, you know, but then

overnight you're all clammed up, acting like you never had a sister who actually cares about you...I'm sick of it."

Harry looked at her, surprised. "Oh... well..." He bit his lip. She wouldn't believe him if he did tell the truth.

"Something's up, and you won't tell me. Suddenly you can't remember that our house isn't connected to the Floo network, and you think dead people are alive, and living people are dead, and you're forgetting everything!"

He searched for an excuse. "I...er..."

"Don't lie to me. I know you're not my brother," she spat. "My brother was different. My brother didn't give a damn about what was going on with the war. My brother was a lousy Seeker. My brother didn't care whether he got a top Transfiguration grade or not. My brother didn't go around pulling wands on people."

Harry tried rearrange his face into what he hoped was an innocent look, but she just glared at him. "Don't play stupid with me, Harry James Potter. I overheard Dad telling Mum that you pulled a wand on him on the first day of summer, and that you forgot Moody was the Defence teacher!"

Harry stared at her, at a loss for words.

"You'd better have a good explanation for all of this, or I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're the one who's a Death Eater under Polyjuice Potion," she snarled, her hand resting on her pocket. Harry knew she was close to pulling a wand on *him*.

"You won't believe me if I tell you the truth," he said, looking away.

"Yes, I will," she said defiantly. "Have I ever *not* believed you?"

"I don't know," he said shamefacedly. "I can't remember."

"SEE?"

They glared at each other for a long moment, but then Harry shrugged and said, "Let's talk in my room."

She stepped aside and let him pass, then followed him up the stairs and down the hall.

Once in his room, Harry shut the door and sat down on his bed. Leila plopped down on a squashy chair and stared at him. "Are you going to talk, or do you want me to just ask questions?"

"I'll talk."

There was a long silence as Harry struggled to find a place to start.

"Well?" she said, shooting daggers at him with her eyes.

Harry sighed. "Don't laugh, OK?"

"Do I look like I'm about to laugh?" she said.

He threw a pillow at her, and she arranged it in her lap and leaned her elbows on it.

"I know how to defeat Voldemort."

Leila had turned pale at the sound of the name, but she was staring at him, her anger gone, and an expression of wide curiosity on her pretty face. "Defeat You-Know-Who? What on earth are you talking about?"

"It's hard to explain. A week ago, I woke up in the morning and everything had changed."

"In what way?"

"Well, I suddenly had a mum and dad, and a sister, and Sirius was alive, and Ginny was caught opening the Chamber of Secrets and they sent her to Azkaban, and I had no scar, and Dumbledore died years and years ago, and Snape never came to teach at Hogwarts..."

"Whoa, slow down!" Leila said. "You're not making any sense at all."

“I mean, I guess what I’m trying to say is... I used to live in a different world, until a week ago.”

Leila snorted, and looked like she was about to laugh, but after a long moment she just said, “You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m telling you the truth. One night I was lying in my bedroom at the Dursleys’...”

“Dursleys? Oh, you mean that nasty aunt and uncle and cousin that hate us ‘cause we’re magical.”

“Yeah, and the next thing I know I’m waking up in this bed, and the room’s loads bigger and nicer and I see Mum and Dad and Sirius and it completely freaked me out ‘cause they’re dead and...”

“Are you telling me Mum and Dad and Sirius weren’t alive in the other world?” Leila said, looking stunned.

So Harry explained to her about how Sybill Trelawney had made a prophecy and because of it Voldemort had murdered his mum and dad sixteen years before, believing Harry to be the Chosen One. Harry told her how he used to have a scar, and how the protection of Lily’s sacrifice had kept him from dying from the killing curse. Then he outlined his miserable years at the Dursleys’, how he had discovered his magical abilities with the arrival of the Hogwarts letters, and how Hagrid had fetched him in the middle of the night. He told her about his first and second years at Hogwarts, and the attempts the defeated bodiless Voldemort had made to kill Harry once again, how he, Ron, and Hermione had saved the Philosopher’s Stone, and how he had defeated the Basilisk and saved Ginny Weasley in the Chamber of Secrets.

When he got to his third year, Leila had to be filled in about how after the Dark Lord’s fall Sirius had been blamed for the deaths of Lily and James Potter. Then he launched into the story of Sirius’s escape from Azkaban, the repeated attacks on the castle, Wormtail the rat, the confrontation in the Shrieking Shack, Lupin’s transformation, and Hermione’s Time Turner.

The fourth year was even harder to explain, because he had to tell her all about Barty Crouch, Jr., and Voldemort's plan to use Harry's blood as an ingredient for his rebirth. When he told Leila he had competed in the Triwizard Tournament at the age of fourteen, her eyes had flown open, but she did not speak. She gave a little gasp though when he related the story of Cedric Diggory and the Portkey that transported them to the graveyard, where he had duelled with the newly reborn Voldemort and watched his parents emerge from the end of Voldemort's wand.

Then he launched into the fifth year, explaining how his scar had connected him to Voldemort causing him to feel emotions that didn't belong to his body, and see things through Voldemort's perspective. He described attacking Mr. Weasley, and the weird dreams of long corridors and black doors. He explained how the Ministry was interfering with Hogwarts, how the students weren't learning how to defend themselves, and how Hermione and Ron had convinced him to start Dumbledore's Army, a secret society to learn defence spells and things. When he told her of his life-long Quidditch ban, she actually exclaimed in anger, "That evil hag! That's horrible!"

"You play Quidditch on the Gryffindor Team, don't you?" Harry asked.

"Of course I do. I play Chaser," Leila said. "Go on with your story... not that I believe you yet," she added hastily.

Harry explained Voldemort's clever plan to get the prophecy, the duel in the Ministry, and Sirius's death through the veil. He explained about the sixth year, his Potions book and the aid he received from the Half-Blood Prince, and how he had suspected Malfoy of being up to something dodgy. "Well, he is a git," Leila said darkly. "He tried to hex me on the Hogwarts Express a few weeks ago... bad idea. Death Eater though, I would have never guessed."

"Well, we don't know whether he is in this world, just that he is one in my life," Harry pointed out fairly, then gave her a detailed description of his visits with Dumbledore, the background of Tom Riddle, and the remaining Horcruxes. Feeling a growing lump in his throat, he recounted the night he and Dumbledore had travelled to the cave, battled the Inferi, and retrieved the locket. He pressed on, glazing

over the details of the tower scene, Snape's betrayal, and his final mission to find the Horcruxes.

"But I don't have the scar anymore," Harry finished, "and I'm not the Chosen One anymore."

Leila's eyes narrowed again. "That's some story."

"It's the truth."

"I still have some questions."

Harry waited.

"What's the real reason you've been going over to Sirius's house every day?"

Harry decided to tell the truth. It couldn't hurt...and he wasn't sure she'd believe a lie. Despite her brutal interrogation, Harry was beginning to like his fiery younger sister a lot. "You're a lot like Mum," he said before he could stop himself.

"Don't dodge the question," she said fiercely.

"Fine. I'm going to become an Animagus."

"Why?"

"So I can get Ginny out of Azkaban."

Her mouth dropped. Harry felt a burst of pleasure at finally shocking her beyond words.

"You...you...what?"

"I'm going to save Ginny from Azkaban," Harry said again, more firmly.

"That's impossible!"

"No, it's not. Sirius did it, Barty Crouch did it, and I can do it too. I'll come up with a plan."

“You’re mad.”

“I know,” said Harry, wryly, thinking of Lupin. “Any more questions?”

“Yeah. Did you like Ginny?”

Harry paused. “Yeah,” he said softly.

Leila was silent for a long time. Then she said simply, “I believe you. About everything, I mean.”

“You do?” Harry said, surprised.

“Yes. I don’t think you’d lie about that. And it’s the only explanation that makes sense. Mum and Dad weren’t the only ones to notice how weird you’ve been acting. I can see it too. So,” she said, unfolding herself from the chair. “What will you do now?”

Harry shrugged. “Lupin has re-formed the Order, and told a select group the information I just told you about Horcruxes. They want proof, so now I’ve got to help him find a Horcrux before next week. I have to find a way to sneak out for a day so we can search Hogwarts for the diary.”

“And saving Ginny?”

“Well, obviously I have to complete Animagus training first. I’m working hard, and Sirius thinks I’ll have it learned in a couple of months. Maybe sooner. Hey,” Harry said, grinning broadly. “Watch this.” He screwed up his face and turned his hair red.

Leila laughed, delighted. “Will you teach me how to do that?”

“Maybe,” he said noncommittally. Harry suddenly had an idea. “Leila? Have you ever poked around in Mum and Dad’s stuff?”

She looked hard at him, then said, “Promise you won’t tell Mum and Dad?”

“Have I ever?”

“Well, there was that one time I was going out with Theodore Nott and you...”

“You went out with Theodore Nott?” Harry almost shouted.

“...and you obviously don’t remember that either...honestly, Harry, he’s quite a nice bloke, but you had to go blabbing to Mum and Dad that I was seeing a Slytherin and they grounded me for months and months.”

Harry shook his head, trying to remember what they were talking about earlier. “Well, I need to talk to you about him later...” His sister shot him a vicious glare. “...but back to the original topic, Mum and Dad’s old school stuff.”

“Oh yeah, I did,” she said. “I was looking for old letters of Mum’s because she hinted one day that she went out with more than one guy before she and Dad got together. I wanted to know who, so I waited till they were out on Order business and went looking.”

“Did you ever find an invisibility cloak?”

“A what?”

“A silvery cloak that makes you invisible when you put it on.”

Leila scratched her chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. I’m not entirely sure, but I think I found one once. I don’t remember where, though. Why?”

“Because I have to help Lupin find a Horcrux! And if the diary is in the Chamber of Secrets, I’m the only one who can open it, ‘cause I’m a Parselmouth.”

“Then I’ll help you,” said Leila resolutely.

Chapter 10

“Operation Distract Mum,” Leila whispered to Harry. It was the following day, and both were crouched on the stairway. James was gone to Quidditch practice, and Lily was cleaning the kitchen after the noon meal.

“Are you sure you can keep her occupied for a couple of hours?” Harry said skeptically.

“Leave it to me,” his sister said, grinning conspicuously. “Mum won’t know what hit her. Watch the expert work.”

Leila slipped out into the living room shutting the stairway door behind her. Harry pressed his air against the cool wood.

“Mum,” he heard Leila say tentatively. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

The clattering of pots and pans stopped. “Sure, Leila. What is it?”

“Well...It’s about something that happened at school...”

Harry bit back a laugh. Leila’s voice was trembling; she sounded as though she was going to break into tears.

“Oh, honey...” Lily said softly. “Tell me what happened.”

“There was this boy I liked...”

Harry scampered back up the stairs quietly. He had no wish to listen to Leila’s woeful tale; he had an invisibility cloak to find.

The attic was dark and cool, with an odd assortment of both Muggle and Wizarding furniture and knickknacks. Harry passed a couple of old mirrors, a stack of old brooms (probably the ones James had worn out), and a whole wardrobe of clothes from the seventies. Finally he found what he was looking for—a stack of musty-smelling boxes labeled “School.”

Harry pulled up a creaky stool and started to look. He found piles of his parents' old textbooks, old school robes, and photo albums full of waving people in tiny pictures. He even came across a box of old Zonko's joke stuff—old Crude Quills that wrote insults to the person who tried to use them, silverware charmed to make food taste horrible, and an assortment of firecrackers and dung bombs. Another box was full of ink drawings all bearing the tiny signature Lily Evans in the bottom right corner. Harry recognized Sirius, James, Peter, and Remus, along with an assortment of other girls and boys who must have been Lily's friends during her time at Hogwarts. Then realizing with a jolt how much time had passed, he quickly moved on to the next box.

This one was full of old clothes, but at the bottom, Harry discovered a small wooden box. He ran his fingers over the flowery engravings and found the latch. The lid swung upward on hinges, revealing rows of neatly stacked letters. All seemed to be addressed to Lily Evans in the same cramped handwriting. Harry's curiosity subdued the tiny twinge of guilt he was feeling in the pit of his stomach as he picked up a letter at random and began to read.

Dear Lily,

Your letter came this morning by owl. A feeling of joy washed over me when I recognized your purple ink. Although I admit, I already knew who the owl was from before I saw the letter—no one but you writes so faithfully.

I'm sorry to hear you had another fight with your sister. I can tell you love her a lot, and I relate to your situation. It's amazing how uncomprehending Muggles can be about our ways. My father was a Muggle, and he finally left my mum a few years ago. He hated us, hated me in particular for turning out to be just like Mum. I think Mum loved him, though, because she never seemed to forgive me for my part in driving him away.

Congratulations for winning the Potions award from Slughorn!. I knew you would get it. I guess I win the bet, huh? You won instead of me. Next time we go to Hogsmede you have to pay for the Butterbeers.

This holiday is stretching so long... I can't wait for it to be over. Only a few more weeks and I can see you again on the Hogwarts Express. Can you believe we made it to our sixth year? I never thought I would. Especially with the constant bombardment from those dirty, slimy, rodents who call themselves Marauders...

But I apologize. Although I know you detest them too, I did make an oath I would not insult any Gryffindors in your presence whether they deserved it or not. Though I should remind you that it was my house, not yours that won the Quidditch Cup and House Cup last year...

Again I have strayed from the subject into grounds that may be unsafe for conversation between you and me, who are from Houses that differ as the night and day. But strangely when I am with you, I forget both my background and my insufficiencies and I feel that I can rise to any level for you. I can attain any height if you will be there to cheer me on. You are special to me, and I know you have asked me not to say the words, but I feel I must. I love you, Lily. We are of two different worlds, but somehow a bridge has formed.

Waiting impatiently for our next meeting,

Harry stared. There was no signature. The corner of the letter had been ripped away, as if his mum hadn't wanted anyone to know who the letter had been from. The letter was certainly not from James or even from a Gryffindor. It was probably no one Harry knew, but why did he feel like he had seen that handwriting somewhere before?

Harry shoved the letter into his pocket, meaning to show it to Leila later. He closed the box and rearranged the clothes on top of it.

Five boxes later, he found what he was looking for—James Potter's Invisibility Cloak—and something else useful that Harry had not been expecting to find—the Marauder's Map. Why his father had ended up with the map was a mystery, but it was definitely a turn of luck in Harry's favor. He closed the boxes, repositioning them in a dusty stack. Shoving the needed items under his shirt, Harry crept back down the stairs and into his room.

Leila burst into his room after another fifteen minutes. "You'd better have found that stupid cloak," she grumbled. "I am not covering for you again. I had to listen to two hours of Mum's boy advice!"

"Yeah, I found it," said Harry. "And something else too." Harry drew the Marauder's Map out from under his bed. "Watch." Pulling out his wand, he said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Lines suddenly began to appear on the blank parchment, forming the outlines of a map of Hogwarts.

"Wow," Leila breathed, "How did you..."

"Like I said, in the other..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she said, tossing her head impatiently. "You learned in the other reality. So who created this map? My brother or not, I *know* you don't have enough brain power to make something this advanced."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Harry said, grinning. "No, I didn't create it. Dad did, along with Sirius, Peter, and Remus, when they were all at Hogwarts. But enough on the map. Have you ever seen this letter before?"

Harry pulled the letter from his pocket and handed it to Leila, who unfolded it and quickly scanned it.

"Yeah, I have," she said. "I told you, I was reading Mum's old letters to try to figure out who she was going out with before Dad, but all the letters have the name torn off at the bottom. I think she might not even want Dad to find out."

"I'm sure Dad already knows who it is. He was at Hogwarts with her for seven years," Harry reminded her. "It must be someone else who she's trying to hide the identity of the writer from."

"Like her insensitive kids who snoop around in her old school stuff?" Leila said, smirking.

“Maybe...” Harry said doubtfully. “Have you ever seen this handwriting before?”

Leila looked at the letter once more. “Nope, never.”

“Look again,” Harry pressed. “Are you sure it couldn’t be the handwriting of any of the Hogwarts professors?”

Leila shook her head. “I’m sure. I’ve never seen it before. So what are you going to do about retrieving the diary?”

Harry sighed. “I have no idea. Mum’s not working this week, so she’s always going to be home! Dad will be most of the time too. I have no idea how to get out without their detection.”

“Just don’t go when they’re watching,” Leila said.

“Huh?”

“Go at night, when they’re asleep. If you’re quiet, you can return before the morning, and they’ll never find out.”

Harry stared at her. Why hadn’t he thought of this before?

“If they wake up before you’re gone,” she continued, “I’ll cover for you with a story.”

“Leila, you’re a genius.”

She colored slightly, but flashed him a grin. “I know.”

“Remus!”

There were a few moments of silence, but then Lupin’s head appeared in the two-way mirror.

“Harry. Has something happened?”

“I found a way to leave so we can find the diary.”

Chapter 11

Night had fallen over Godric's Hollow. Outside, a slight breeze was moving the leaves gently, and clouds were hiding the sliver of moon hanging in the sky. Inside, Harry Potter sat once again at the upstairs window, his face pressed against the cool glass, waiting. The clock he kept glancing at read 11:52.

The sound of his bedroom door opening and closing reached his ears. He turned to see Leila crossing the room.

"Well, it's done," she said, looking smug.

"What's done?"

"I put a Silencing Charm around Mum and Dad's room. They won't hear a thing."

"You *what*?"

She plopped down on the bed. "No one will ever know. The Ministry will just think it was Mum or Dad who cast the spell."

"But you're not seventeen..."

"So? I've been getting away with it for years." She grinned at Harry's shocked expression. "Oh, don't be a baby. You've done it before too."

Harry ducked his head, thinking of the Aunt Marge incident, and more recently, the *Specularis* spell he'd performed on the first day of summer holidays.

Suddenly Leila smacked herself on the forehead. "Oh gosh..."

"What?"

She smiled sadly at him. "I keep forgetting that you're not my brother. I mean," she said hastily when Harry raised his eyebrows, "you are, of course, but it's different. I don't even know if you've ever performed magic out of school."

"For the record, I have." Any other time Harry would have elaborated, but tonight he just turned back to the window.

She yawned, and stretched out on the bed. "I'm sure I'm never going to sleep a wink tonight, thinking about you and Uncle Remus in the Chamber..."

"I told you," said Harry impatiently. "For the last time, it's not dangerous! The Basilisk..."

"...can't come unless Voldemort calls it. I know, I know." Leila sighed, then rolled over on her stomach, propping her chin up on her elbows. "I wish I could come with you."

"Believe me, you don't want to go where we're going," Harry said flatly. "You'd better thank your lucky stars that Lucius Malfoy didn't slip the diary into your cauldron. You could be in Azkaban right now."

Leila was silent for a minute, then she spoke. "You have to rescue her, don't you?"

Harry stared pointedly out the window. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try," he said softly.

The glowing red numbers on the clock read 12:00.

"Midnight," Leila acknowledged. "So where's..."

In answer, Harry pointed. Leila pulled herself off the bed and looked out the window. Over the tops of the houses, a black speck was growing larger and larger. Harry threw the double windows open, and a few moments later Remus Lupin flew through and landed noiselessly on the floor.

"Good gracious, what a flight," he said, dropping the broom and smoothing down his windswept robes and hair. "Hello, Harry. Leila! What... Harry, what is *she* doing here?"

"She knows," Harry said. "Don't worry, she won't tell."

"But... Do you think telling her was a good idea?" Lupin said skeptically.

"I'm sure," Harry said firmly. "She's already been a huge help."

"I don't know..."

"Would you please stop talking about me like I'm not here?" Leila said, stamping her foot. "Honestly, if you want to stand here bickering for the rest of the night, be my guest. But you don't have very many hours left before dawn. I mean, if Harry's not back I can always come up with a story for Mum and Dad about him sneaking off to snog Cho Chang somewhere..."

Harry shot her a glare, but Lupin was nodding. "You're right. Harry, do you have your broom?"

Harry retrieved it from the closet, and hastily stuffed the Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map into his pockets as Leila began lecturing.

"Don't fly too low and let the Muggles see you. Don't go into the Chamber unless you absolutely have to, and please be careful!"

"Yes, Mum," Harry mumbled as he got ready to mount his broom.

"Stay in the clouds," she continued. "You're lucky it's not a full moon tonight."

"For more than one reason," Lupin muttered sullenly as he and Harry kicked off and soared away into the night.

The wind rushed past Harry's ears. Far below he could see street lights illuminating miniscule houses and streets. He was tailing Lupin closely, who seemed to be flying northwest. They flew higher and broke through the cloud cover.

The night air was cool, but not cold, perfect conditions for flying. Lupin was shouting something to him, but over the flap of robes and the whistle of the wind, Harry couldn't hear a thing. Then Lupin began to descend. "What are you doing?" Harry yelled, but his words were

lost in the wind. Harry pointed his broom downward and followed Lupin. After a few more minutes, they landed in an alley in what appeared to be a small town. Scattered greenish streetlights revealed several dingy looking shops and pubs.

"Where are we... what are we..." Harry panted.

"This way, Harry," Lupin said, walking toward a particularly dirty bar with a sign reading "The Black Dragon." "You didn't expect that we'd fly all the way to Hogwarts, did you?"

"I..."

"We'll travel by Floo Powder to the Hog's Head and from there we can either fly or walk to Hogwarts. Follow me."

Harry nodded, and Lupin lead him into the pub. It was empty, except for an old witch behind the bar, wiping glasses. She looked up at Lupin and narrowed her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she rasped, clanking the glass down on the counter.

"We simply need to use your fireplace, that's all."

"Go, then," she spat. "Leave me alone. Last time you came in here, I had Ministry officials plaguing the place for weeks. You're a wanted man, Remus Lupin."

Lupin sighed. "As if I don't know it, Verity. Like I said, we'll be gone in a moment."

He turned back to Harry. "I'm going to send you first, I think. You do know how to use Floo Powder, don't you?"

Harry nodded, and took a handful from the flowerpot sitting next to the fireplace. Throwing it into the flames, he cried, "Hog's Head!" and felt himself being jerked away. He was spinning wildly. Fireplaces were flashing by on either side...then he was flying out, landing hard on the wooden floor of the Hog's Head. Harry rubbed the soot from his eyes, and looked about. The Hog's Head, unlike the Black Dragon,

was full of people. Most of the customers hadn't paid a bit of notice to him, though the bartender was watching keenly from behind the counter. Harry stood, feeling uncomfortable, and picked up his Cleansweep from where it had fallen. A moment later, Lupin shot out, brushed the soot off his robes, and said, "After me, Harry."

They slipped outside, then mounted their brooms. Harry watched the dark castle grow closer and closer, and was reminded painfully of another night, not even a month ago, when he and Dumbledore had flown this very path, illuminated by the light of the Dark Mark hanging over the Astronomy Tower.

Lupin landed on the front steps of Hogwarts. Pulling out his wand, he cried, "Expecto Patronum!" and a silvery beaver shot out and disappeared through the front doors. "Minerva will be down in a few minutes," Lupin said, looking satisfied. "Harry, you'd best put on your Invisibility Cloak now. Don't reveal yourself unless we cannot find the diary in the castle and are forced to enter the Chamber. And then only when I say so."

Harry retrieved the cloak and threw it over his shoulders. "A beaver?" he asked incredulously. "Your Patronus is a beaver?"

Lupin smiled faintly. "Did I ever tell you what a Patronus really is, Harry?"

"No."

"The technical definition is the embodiment of the positive thoughts of the caster. More practically, the Patronus is one of two things: either an animal that the spell caster feels a special connection to because he like that animal, or an animal he views as protection, whether he realizes it or not. Your Patronus is a stag, because you feel protection and guidance when you think of your father, whose Animagus form was... is..." Lupin corrected himself. "...a stag. As for my Patronus, do you think I feel any kind of protection when I think of a wolf?"

"No," Harry said, reddening with embarrassment. He was glad the darkness hid his feelings.

Lupin smiled again. "Don't worry, it happens all the time. People thinking my Patronus should be a wolf, that is. But I feel much more akin to beavers. They're quiet, intelligent, and loyal."

"Professor? I mean, Remus?" Harry asked. Old habits died hard, he thought ruefully.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?" Lupin nodded, so Harry continued. "What was that spell you used when you sent me a message during the meeting? I heard you say, 'Don't say anything. I'll take care of this. Pettigrew will not find out about the Horcruxes.' What happened?"

"A simple spell, but not significant enough to be taught in Charms," Lupin said. "The incantation is *Messilenti*, but it is nonverbal. You have to focus on the message you want to send, the person who is to receive it, and the incantation at the same time, and if you are successful, the recipient will hear your voice clearly repeating the message." He paused and listened, then said, "I hear someone approaching."

A moment later the castle doors were thrown open, and Minerva McGonagall appeared, in a dressing gown and slippers. "Good heavens, Remus! What are you doing here at this time of the night?"

"It's good to see you too, Minerva," Lupin said calmly, stepping in the castle while allowing plenty of room for Harry to slip in before he shut the door. "Lumos," Lupin said, and his wand light joined McGonagall's casting strange shadows on the walls and ceiling of the entrance hall.

McGonagall just stared at him.

"Go on, ask me the secret question," Lupin encouraged. "Of course, if I was a Death Eater, I wouldn't have been able to get past the wards, but it's a good idea just for safety precautions. Or shall I ask you a question first?"

McGonagall seemed to be shaken out of her trance. "If you insist, Remus. For what reason did I give you your very first detention in your first year?"

Lupin didn't blink an eye. "Sneaking into the library after hours and trying to read some of the restricted books. But," he added, "James and Sirius put me up to it."

The woman snorted, and Harry had to bite back the laugh rising in his own throat.

"Who did you give detention to in our fifth year Transfiguration class when James Vanished your chair before you sat?"

Minerva McGonagall's face turned a slightly redder shade. "Remus! Really, I did apologize for that incident!"

"Just answer the question."

"I gave you detention, because I was sure you were the only Marauder who could pull off such a large *Evanesco* spell at the time. You should feel honoured!"

"I wasn't feeling so honoured when I had to scrub the floor of the Great Hall on my hands and knees," Lupin said lightly.

"Enough with the reminiscing," McGonagall said sternly. "What do you want?"

"A look at the castle," Lupin said. "I believe there is a Horcrux within these walls. I would have come during the day, but I'm pretty sure I'm being followed these days by Ministry officials."

"You believe Lord Voldemort has a Horcrux here?" McGonagall said incredulously.

"I'm positive. Will you let me have a look?"

"I suppose," she said doubtfully. "I don't think you'll find a piece of Voldemort's soul here, though."

"A look is all I ask for."

For the next hour, Harry followed Lupin and McGonagall around the castle as they searched the classrooms, the Gryffindor tower, and anywhere else Ginny Weasley might have hid a diary. In each room, Lupin used the *Revealato* spell to look for traces of dark magic, and the *Accio* spell to summon the diary. Each time both failed to produce any results, Harry became more and more convinced that the diary was either in the Chamber, or in the hands of a Death Eater right now. And McGonagall became increasingly annoyed when Lupin refused to tell her exactly what they were searching for.

"Really Remus," she huffed as they climbed the forty-ninth staircase that night. "I've half a mind to go back to bed and let you search all by yourself!" But she didn't. Harry had the strange suspicion that pure curiosity was keeping McGonagall from carrying out her empty threat.

Finally they reached the girls bathroom on the second floor. Instead of casting the usual spells, though, Lupin held up his wand to light the room, and turned to face McGonagall.

"I'm sorry, Minerva, but I have not been completely honest with you."

Her face paled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I did come here to look for the Horcrux, but I was pretty sure it wasn't in the school. I had to check, though, before I look in this next place."

"This is the girl's bathroom..."

"And it is also the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets."

McGonagall took two steps back and clutched at one of the sinks for support. "Remus! You can't be serious!"

"I am completely serious, Minerva," Lupin said calmly. "My sources have told me that it is true. Have you met Moaning Myrtle?"

"A few times," McGonagall said, glaring suspiciously at him over her spectacles.

"She is the ghost of the same Myrtle who died years ago when the Chamber was opened the first time. This bathroom is her home. It is where she died, and it is also the entrance to the Chamber. Unfortunately, there is only one way to open it--by speaking Parselmouth. Which leads me to another minor detail I have not been honest about."

McGonagall drew herself up. "Alright, Remus. Let's have it. Bring out your friend."

"My...friend?" Lupin faltered.

"I may be old, but I am not blind and deaf. I saw the second broomstick on the steps. I heard someone knock into those desks in the Potions Dungeon." Harry cringed. "So bring him out."

Lupin gave a resigned sigh. "On one condition, Minerva."

"Name it."

"You tell no one you saw him here tonight. Not a soul."

She gave him a long look, then nodded her head. "Agreed."

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak off.

"Potter!"

"Hello, Professor," Harry said, folding his Invisibility Cloak and placing it safely back in his pocket.

McGonagall clutched her chest and leaned again on the sink again. "Potter, what do you think you're doing here?"

"I need him," Remus said. "He speaks Parseltounge."

"Harry Potter? No."

"I'm afraid he does," Remus said. "He's the only Parselmouth I know, therefore he is the only one who can open the Chamber."

"But a student..." McGonagall said weakly.

"I'll be seventeen in two weeks," Harry said, annoyed.

"I don't know..."

"Minerva, just watch. Then you'll know it's true. Go ahead, Harry."

Harry moved over to the sink in front of Myrtle's stall, and stared hard at the copper snake. "Open up," he said.

Lupin shook his head. "Parseltongue, Harry."

Harry suddenly felt a jolt of fear. His scar was gone. Did that mean his abilities were gone as well? Maybe he wasn't a Parselmouth anymore.

He looked at the snake, trying to believe that it was alive. The wand light reflected off the snake's eyes...

"Open up," Harry said, but this time a hissing noise emitted from his throat. He felt a thrill rush through his veins as the tap glowed and began to spin. The sink began to move and a few moments later it was gone, leaving in its place a large pipe several feet across in diameter.

"Are you coming?" Lupin said gently to the wide-eyed woman.

"That's the entrance?" McGonagall said shakily. "To think it was right here and we never found it..."

"Minerva?"

"But what about the monster?" she said, her voice a little louder. "Surely you are not planning on challenging it to a duel, are you?"

"Not tonight," Lupin said. "Besides, it can only come when the heir of Slytherin summons it. And unless Harry here is hiding his true lineage, I can safely say that none of us fit that criteria. Would you like to go first, Minerva?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Then I will, by your leave." Lupin nodded to her, then slipped into the hole and disappeared from view.

Harry looked over at McGonagall. "It's OK, Professor. I promise."

McGonagall seemed to pull herself together. She marched over to the hole and slid her slippered feet into the opening. Then without another word she too disappeared from view. Harry waited a few seconds to let her get a head start, then he slid into the dark opening.

The pipe was if possible even more slimy and dark than he remembered. He slid on and on into the inky blackness, feeling his stomach flip as the pipes steepened. Finally the pipe leveled out and Harry landed on the cold damp floor of the tunnel.

Lupin helped him up, and then looked expectantly at him. Harry realized that Lupin expected him to lead. "Um, let's try this way," he said, pointing to the right. McGonagall looked at them strangely but didn't say anything as Harry lit his wand and led the way down the tunnel.

The only sounds to be heard were the echoing footsteps. Harry felt something crunch under his foot. Raising his wand, he saw the same piles of small animal bones. Then in the darkness he saw the huge shape of the Basilisk skin.

"What's that?" McGonagall breathed, her eyes wide.

"It's just the skin," Harry said, walking over to it and poking it with his lit wand. "See? It's dead."

"A Basilisk?" McGonagall gasped. "That's what's down here? But you said it can't come unless Slytherin's heir summons it."

"Right," said Harry. "Careful not to do anything to the walls. They look as if they might cave in any moment."

They walked on in silence. Several twists and turns later they came to the solid wall on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set in emeralds.

"Open," Harry hissed, and they obliged. He looked back at Lupin and McGonagall, who were both looking more nervous than before. "It's OK," he repeated. Then he stepped through the doorway.

The Chamber was exactly as he remembered it. On either side of the long room, tall pillars sporting even more carved serpents rose to the blackness above. Harry moved forward between the columns and from the footsteps behind, he knew Lupin and McGonagall were following. His trainers made squeaking noises on the damp marble pavement as he walked.

Finally he came to the end. The statue of Salazar Slytherin rose impressively above him. The eyes seemed to be leering down at the three unwelcome visitors. Harry moved forward, to the foot of the statue. His heart leapt when he saw the small square object lying open on the floor. It was the diary.

"Look!"

Harry picked up the diary and held it out to McGonagall and Lupin. Lupin nodded, his face breaking into a relieved smile, but McGonagall was looking angrily from the diary to Lupin and back again. "We came down here for a diary?" she exclaimed, her voice rising dangerously.

"Not just a diary. A Horcrux. Listen, we'll... I'll explain everything when we get out of this place. How do a nice hot cup of tea and a few cleaning spells sound to you?"

"You'd better have a very good explanation for this," McGonagall said, snatching up the diary and stomping away towards the doors at the opposite end of the Chamber.

Harry looked up at the giant statue of Slytherin. "That's where the Basilisk came out," he said softly, and pointed to Slytherin's mouth.

Lupin said nothing, but Harry felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Ginny was lying right between the feet right there. I thought she was dead," Harry said. For some reason it was important to explain this. "Riddle was standing over there. He took my wand while I was with Ginny."

Lupin's grip on Harry's shoulder tightened. "He said he was the greatest sorcerer to ever live, but I told him he was wrong. I told him that Dumbledore was the greatest wizard ever. Then Fawkes flew in and brought the Sorting Hat. Riddle called the Basilisk, and told it to kill me, but Fawkes pecked its eyes out and the Sorting Hat gave me Godric Gryffindor's sword. I somehow managed to kill the Basilisk when it stuck, but one of the fangs was embedded in my arm. I was right over there." Harry pointed. "Against that wall. I thought I was dying. Riddle thought so too, because he told me I was going to join my dear Mudblood mother.

"But then Fawkes came and his tears healed my wound. Riddle was furious. He was about to kill me, but I plunged the Basilisk fang into the diary and ink spurted everywhere. Riddle started screaming, then he just disappeared. Ginny woke up. She was scared everyone was going to blame her for doing it. But she was OK."

Both stood silently contemplating the things that had happened in this room. Then Harry heard someone clear their throat.

"Remus, Harry, I think it is about time to be going." McGonagall's voice had lost its sharpness. "I believe you have more to tell me than you first let on."

The Headmaster's--or in this case Headmistress's--office had not changed much since Harry had last been there, only weeks before, but realities away. Gone were Dumbledore's silver instruments and knick-knacks, but Fawkes's perch was still present, as well as a Pensieve in the corner. The same large desk still stood in the middle of the room. Harry could hear the soft snores from the portraits lining the walls.

Harry let go of the rock McGonagall had turned into a Portkey in the Chamber. The Headmistress conjured up two chairs. "Pardon me while I go change into some decent clothes," she said briskly. Harry looked at her blankly, then realized that Minerva McGonagall was caked in dirt and slime from the Chamber. Her hair had come out of the long braid, and some of it was plastered to her face. Her red dressing gown was red no more. Harry had to bite back a laugh. He'd never seen his Transfiguration teacher in such a state before.

"Don't sit on the chairs or couch before cleaning yourselves off if you value your life," the woman warned, before disappearing through doorway behind the desk.

Harry and Lupin began casting spells to clean themselves off. Harry wished he had Hermione. She was always much better at Charms than he was. The Scourgify spell Harry was using was only vanishing some of the mud on his robes.

Several minutes later, McGonagall emerged, wearing her school robes. Her hair was wet, but pulled neatly up into a bun.

"Merlin's Beard," she muttered when she saw Harry and Lupin still trying to clean off the mud they had missed. "Scourgify!"

Harry's robes were spotless again. "Thanks, Professor," he said gratefully, sinking down into the chair. It was soft and plump, a far cry better than McGonagall's usual straight-backed chairs.

"Now," she said, sitting behind her desk and watching them over the tops of her spectacles. "I believe you have a story to tell me, Mr. Potter. Forgive me for eavesdropping, but I could not help overhearing a tale you told Lupin in the Chamber and it is very contradictory to the Chamber of Secrets story I am acquainted with."

With a quick glance at Lupin, who sighed, but nodded in approval, Harry held out the diary. "This is Tom Riddle's diary, Professor. Or Lord Voldemort, when he was young and at Hogwarts. It's a Horcrux, but not just a Horcrux, because writing in it will allow Voldemort to possess the writer. Watch."

Harry borrowed her pen and ink and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter," on the first page. The ink faded into the page. Suddenly words began to appear on the page. "Harry Potter. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Tom Riddle."

McGonagall watched, wide-eyed. "This is the diary Ginny Weasley wrote in all the time in her first year?"

Harry nodded. "If you write in it too much Voldemort can possess you. He can make you do things. That's what happened to Ginny. One of Voldemort's Death Eaters, Lucius Malfoy, slipped the diary into her cauldron in Flourish and Blotts at Diagon Alley in her first year. She wrote in it and Riddle made her kill the roosters, and write the words on the wall in blood, and open the Chamber."

"So she was innocent," the headmistress said quietly. "I told them she couldn't have done it, but that boy, Draco Malfoy caught her in the act. He told his father and they sent Ministry officials to take her away."

The clock on McGonagall's wall struck 4:00. Had it only been four hours since Harry had said good-bye to Leila? It had felt like much longer.

McGonagall straightened. "You still haven't told me how you both seem to know so much information, and why your story, Mr. Potter, is so different from the accounts I have previously heard."

Harry glanced at Lupin, who, heaving another sigh, plunged into the account of the Apero, and the other reality they had lived in. Lupin explained about the prophecy, quickly outlined the doings of the Order of the Phoenix, and told of how Dumbledore had been the one to discover the Horcruxes, hindered by the recent events of Dumbledore's death and Snape's betrayal.

"The diary was the first Horcrux discovered, and likely Ginny Weasley's story would have been very similar had it not been for Harry here," Lupin concluded.

Harry took up the story and explained how he, Ron, and Hermione had figured out the clues, and how he had killed the Basilisk and destroyed the Horcrux, rescuing Ginny.

"That makes a lot more sense," McGonagall said once Harry had finished. She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "Now I understand why you both seem to know much more than you should. An Aperio, though. Good Lord, one of those hasn't been seen in a thousand years. It's very complicated magic and nearly impossible to undo. I understand why you are trying to keep this a secret, though." she acknowledged. "It is for the best."

The clock struck 5:00, and Lupin glanced up. "Did it take an hour to tell the story?" he said, alarmed. "I've got to get Harry home before his parents wake up!"

McGonagall stood. "Gentlemen, I thank you for your time. It was a most enlightening experience. Please know that I stand behind you in every decision you make from now on."

Harry looked gratefully at her. "Thank you, Professor. We need all the help we can get."

McGonagall escorted them to the front doors, and bade them good night. Harry and Lupin mounted their brooms and flew across the grounds, but as soon as they had passed the gate, Harry landed.

"What are you doing?" Lupin said, looking confused.

"I'm apparating," Harry said firmly

"Harry! No! You're not..."

"Seventeen... I know. I'm almost seventeen, and I can do it. Besides, Leila told me Dad gets up early sometimes, and I can't risk being found missing."

"But..."

"I can do it, Remus! I apparated myself and Dumbledore from the cave to Hogsmeade, didn't I?"

"I..."

"It's the quickest way home, and we really can't risk taking any more time than we must. You can just go on home. I told you, I can do it myself."

Lupin looked wearily at the stubborn teenager. "All right, Harry. Go ahead. I won't stop you."

Harry took a few steps back, then paused. "Thank you, Professor. For coming tonight."

"I couldn't have found this," Lupin held up the diary, "without you, Harry. Now go, before James and Lily wake up. I'll set about calling another Order meeting."

Harry closed his eyes, and thought of the three D's. He concentrated on the Potters' house in Godric Hollow, he pictured the front yard in his mind, and then he turned.

The sensation of being pulled through an airless tube filled him. He couldn't breathe. The world was spinning... And suddenly Harry felt his feet land on firm ground. He was standing, if only a little shakily, in front of his house.

As the first blushes of pink lit the eastern sky, Harry flew through the still-open windows into his bedroom. He landed a bit breathlessly and was startled by a soft snore.

Leila was stretched out on his bed, fully clothed, her face hidden by a mop of dark hair. One arm hung limply over the side of the mattress.

"Leila, get up!" Harry said, and shook her.

She rolled over and moaned, blindly swatting away his hand. "No, Mum..." she mumbled in her sleep. "He's not here...off shagging Cho...somewhere..."

Harry was horrified. "Leila, you prat! Get off my bed this instant!"

She groaned, and opened one sleepy eye. "Hawwy?" she muttered.

"You're in my bed, squirt," he said, and unmercifully shoved her off. She landed with a thud on the floor.

He turned back to shut the window, and suddenly felt a wave of tiredness sweep over him. Depositing his broom in the closet, Harry fumbled around in the dresser for a pair of pajamas, and pulled his shirt off over his head.

"Eww, I did not need to see all that," Leila snapped. Harry turned, and saw her pulling herself back onto the bed.

"Sod off," he replied, grinning as he slipped the pajama shirt on over his head. "Honestly, Leila, what are Mum and Dad going to say if they find you in my room at five in the morning?"

Harry heard a gasp. "Mum and Dad," Leila said weakly. "The Silencing Charm..."

She dashed out of his room drawing her wand and mumbling things under her breath. Harry finished changing and crawled into bed. His head had hardly hit the pillow before sleep overtook him.

Chapter 13

Harry was dreaming about Quidditch. He was playing Keeper and Ron was the Seeker, but instead of looking for the Snitch, Ron was snogging Cho Chang, who kept throwing Harry dirty looks over Ron's shoulder. Harry tried to look away, but he was having a hard time tearing his eyes from Ron and Cho.

"Harry! Get your head back in the game!" someone yelled. Harry looked over and saw Aunt Petunia in the stands. He flew back to the goals. A hundred Chasers were all flying at him, red Quaffles aimed at the goals. As they drew closer he realized with a sinking feeling that a hundred Ginnys were glaring at him.

"Harry," the Ginny in the lead said in a mournful voice, and with a shock, Harry realized that it wasn't Ginny, but a skeleton. Sunken brown eyes stared back at him from the skull, which was sporting red tresses. Ginny flew closer to him. "Harry... It's your fault..."

"NO!" Harry shouted, flying backwards, away from the crowd of skeleton Ginnys. "I tried! I promise!"

"You failed," she said, watching him coldly. Then she raised her arm and threw the Quaffle through the goal. Suddenly Harry felt something hit him hard on the head.

"Ow!" he cried, and turning he saw Fred and George there, their Beater clubs raised menacingly.

"You didn't save the goal," one of them said, and they began to hit him again and again with their bats...

"Ow! No, I tried! I tried to save it... I tried to save her... I will save her!" Harry yelled as the blows intensified.

He raised his arms to protect himself, and realized that he was clutching blankets.

"Lazy git," a cheerful voice said. "Get up before the day wastes away."

"Oomph." The person had hit him again, but it wasn't a Beater's bat, it was... a pillow?

"Sirius!" Harry complained as he pushed back the covers and drunkenly slid his feet out of the bed. "All normal people are still sleeping."

His cheek earned him another smack with the pillow. "Get up, Harry! Imagine my surprise when I arrive promptly at nine and find you still in bed asleep. Were you just planning on skipping Animagus lessons today and forgot to owl me? Or did you as a cruel joke plan on my accepting the task your mother gave me to 'get Harry out of bed'?"

Harry blinked sleepily at his godfather. "Lessons. Oh yeah. I'll be down in a few minutes."

Once Sirius had left, Harry got up, leaving the bed unmade. He grabbed some clothes and headed for the shower, randomly wondering if they had any house-elves. His room seemed to stay clean, but it might be his mum.

Ten minutes later, Harry finished toweling his hair and headed for the stairs. As he turned the corner, he ran straight into Leila, who was carrying a towel and obviously headed for the bathroom.

"Harry!" she gasped, dropping the towel. "Bloody hell..." A moment later, she had a death grip on his arm and had dragged him through the nearest doorway, slamming the door behind them.

Harry looked around. This must be his parents' room. A king-sized four-poster bed stood in middle; on the left wall was an armoire, on the right a desk. A large window sporting golden curtains provided a nice view of the front of the house

A sharp slap on his arm brought his mind spinning back to reality. "What?" he asked the fuming Leila who looked like she wanted nothing more than to stomp on his toes or submit him to some cruel and unusual undiscovered form of torture.

"You!" she said, keeping her voice low. "You show up this morning, push me out of your bed, and tell me nothing of how last night went!"

"You didn't ask," Harry said, completely nonplussed. He was positive he'd never understand girls.

"That's not the point! You're supposed to tell me how it went!"

"So, I'll tell you now," Harry said, shrugging. "We flew to this place called the Black Dragon and floored from there to the Hog's Head." As he hurriedly related his story, his eye caught something on the desk. Still talking, he ventured over, and found himself staring at an assortment of framed photographs.

"...Lupin sent his Patronus to take the message to McGonagall that we were there..." A picture of his parents at their wedding sat in a heart-shaped frame in the middle of the collage. "...we searched the entire castle..." One photograph displayed a baby with a full head of messy black hair kicking his legs happily. "...Lupin said, 'And it's also the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets'..." Next to that picture was a picture of a baby girl, smiling toothlessly in a pink baby crib. "...McGonagall nearly died when I took off my Invisibility Cloak..." Another photograph of a toddler with black hair holding baby girl carefully, as if she might break. "...We slid down the entrance pipe and landed at the bottom..." The two children playing at the beach. The boy was throwing water at the girl, who was screaming in delight. "...we passed the Basilisk skin..." A birthday party—James and Lily smiling proudly as a small girl blew out five candles on a large cake. Harry caught a glimpse of Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew lingering in the background, all wearing ridiculous party hats. "...and the Chamber door swung open...Leila, are these pictures of us?" Harry asked, completely forgetting about his story.

"Prat," she said, eyes flashing. "Finish your story!"

"Oh yeah... well, we went into the Chamber, found the diary, and left. Oh, and McGonagall knows."

"Knows what?"

"About the Aperio. About Lupin and me. We had to tell her."

"She won't tell Mum and Dad, will she?"

“No.” Harry studied another photograph. It showed a proud looking 11-year-old boy holding a wand and a stack of books and school robes. “These are pictures of us, right?” he asked again.

“Yeah,” she said impatiently. “You’d better get downstairs. Mum and Dad are used to me sleeping in, but for you it’s just suspicious.”

Harry had no desire to move though. His eyes caught on a family photograph, probably taken when he was seven or eight. Leila was perched on her father’s lap, and a younger Harry stood behind the seated couple with one hand on his mum’s shoulder. All were grinning broadly. “These are cool,” he said.

“They’re just stupid pictures,” Leila said. “I look awful.”

“No, you don’t,” Harry countered. “I’ve never seen pictures like this before. I mean, of when I was little.”

Leila paused. “You haven’t?”

“No.”

She tossed her head edgily, but her voice was softer. “Why not?”

“The Dursleys never took pictures of me. I’ve got a few pictures from my years at Hogwarts, and a couple pictures Hagrid gave me from when I was really little before Mum and Dad died, but nothing in between.”

Leila moved closer and looked at the pictures too. “I always thought pictures were stupid. But now...”

“Yeah, well, next time you start taking any of this for granted, remember you could be parentless right now,” Harry said flatly.

She was silent as he examined a few more pictures. “You know,” Leila finally said, “I’ve got a photo album in my room that Mum made me. But I never look at it. If you want it, you can have it.”

“I couldn’t...”

“Shut up, Harry,” she said firmly. “I never look at it! It’s probably in the top of my closet along with the dolls you decapitated when we were little. The album most likely has an inch of dust covering it. It’s yours, and that’s final.”

Harry looked gratefully at his sister. “Thanks, Leila.”

“Don’t mention it. Now get your lazy bum downstairs before Mum and Dad send up a search party,” she commanded.

Chapter 14

The cool hallway of Sirius's apartment was welcome after the blistering heat of the outdoors. Sirius disappeared into the living room, but Harry lingered, gazing through the magical windows at various outdoor scenes. He vaguely wondered how the rest of Sirius's house had changed. "Sirius," he called. "Can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure," came the reply.

Harry climbed the stairs, but instead of stopping at the washroom, he wandered down the hall, not really knowing where he was going or why. Soon he was standing in the drawing room he and his friends had cleaned or "waged war" on two summers previously. It too was very different. Now the walls were clean and brightly painted the colour blue. One thing hadn't changed, though. The old Black family tapestry hung against the back wall. Harry ventured over to it, remembering the conversation he and Sirius had had here. To his surprise, on closer examination, Harry found that Sirius's name was still on the bottom row. Tonks's name was still there too.

"Harry?"

Harry jumped. Sirius was standing at the door, looking at him oddly.

"Oh, sorry," Harry mumbled. "I saw the door open and thought I'd get another look at your family tapestry."

"That old thing," said Sirius contemptuously. "Would've taken it down years ago if my dear old Mum hadn't put a permanent sticking charm on the back."

"I thought you said your mum had taken your name off the tapestry," Harry said, pointing to Sirius's name.

"Your mum, again," said Sirius, grinning. "She said it was a shame to have such a history of dark wizards without a few good wizards on there to ease the eye. So she figured out a spell to put me and Tonks and loads of other people back on the tree."

Harry looked closely and saw that where the many cigarette-burn looking holes had been, there were now names. Many names, with last names he recognized. Longbottom, McGonagall, Weasley, and...

"Sirius, are we related?" Harry asked incredulously, pointing to the "Potter" high on the family tree.

Sirius looked closely. "I suppose we are. Very distantly, but we are related. Like I said, Harry, all pure-blood families are related in some way or another."

Harry was about to ask if he was directly related to Draco Malfoy, but then he glanced down to the name next to Sirius's, and froze.

Regulus Black.

Regulus *Artemis* Black.

"Sirius," Harry said tentatively. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go for it."

"What happened to your brother, Regulus?"

Sirius stiffened. "Why would you ask?" he inquired pleasantly, but Harry could tell the mood was only superficial.

"Just curious," Harry lied.

"He died," Sirius said quickly. A little too quickly, Harry noticed. "Well, we've wasted enough time already. Come along, Harry. We've got lots to do."

Sirius started for the door, but Harry held back. There was something he wanted to check. He quickly scanned the tapestry and found Tonks's name. Beneath it, the dates of birth and death were listed. Tonks had died last summer, Harry noted sadly. Then he looked again at Regulus Black's name. Underneath was a date of birth...but *no date of death*.

Animagus lessons passed quickly. As one-o'clock drew near, Sirius smiled and said, "Harry, you've done superbly. I've never seen someone learn so quickly. You've done in two weeks what it took James and I two years to learn. I don't understand... I mean, why such a display of power now? Don't take it personally, but I know you've never been real good at school in general, and you wrote me several times last year that you were having a hard time especially with casting spells. But this... this is incredible! I don't know what happened."

Harry smiled ruefully. He knew exactly what had happened.

"But as well as your doing," Sirius continued, "we can go no further until you've chosen an Animagus form. Have you thought about it?"

In reality, his Animagus form had been the furthest thing from Harry's mind. He shook his head.

Sirius sighed. "I don't want to rush you, but you need to pick one by either tomorrow or the next day. Until you pick one, all we can do is review the other things you've learned."

"Do you have any good ideas?" Harry said, feeling desperate. He sat down on the couch, his bones still aching a little from the growing and shrinking in height he'd been practicing.

Sirius looked thoughtful. "Well, my personal choice would be a dog," he said slyly.

Harry laughed, then sobered. "A dog would be cool," he said, thinking of how Sirius had slipped through the door to his cell in Azkaban in his dog form. Whatever animal he chose, it would have to be small enough to escape from Azkaban, somehow. He still wasn't sure exactly how to rescue Ginny yet, but he was pretty sure the plan would involve a conglomeration of both Sirius's and Barty Crouch, Jr.'s escapes.

"Well, you could be a stag like your dad," Sirius said, bringing Harry back to reality.

Harry shook his head. "A stag is my Patronus, but I don't think it'd fit for my Animagus form."

"You're probably right there," said Sirius. "It fit your dad, but you are a very different person."

Harry nodded, thinking of the memories of his dad and the Marauders he had once seen in Snape's Pensieve.

"Let's see," Sirius mused. "What are you good at?"

"Quidditch," Harry said immediately. "Flying. And I'm better at Defence than I was last year," he stated as an afterthought. "I'd like to be an Auror."

"Really? I'm impressed. It's a hard job, especially in these times," Sirius admitted. "Hmmm. Flying. Ever thought of being a bird?"

"A bird?" Harry said doubtfully. "What kind of bird?"

Sirius laughed at the expression on his face. "No, not a robin or a sparrow, Harry. I'm talking a bird of prey, something more macho. An eagle. A hawk. Maybe a falcon."

"Can I think about it and tell you tomorrow?"

"No problem, mate."

Chapter 15

Telling Leila, Harry decided, was one of the best decisions he had made so far. Unlike Lupin, who was just as lost as Harry felt in the new reality, Leila was a fountain of information, and wasn't afraid to share it.

"Who is Gregory?" Harry hissed to her as they were doing dishes without magic after lunch that afternoon. Lily had insisted, after they had been kicking each other under the table during the entirety of the meal.

"I'm not sure if I'm speaking to you yet," Leila said loftily, sticking her nose up in the air.

"Awwww, please," he begged. "Do you have any idea how confused I feel? Or how bad it must look when I never have a clue about what Mum and Dad talk about?"

"Fine. But you got off easy this time, Potter," she said, scowling. "Gregory is Dad's Quidditch manager. Dad's always meeting him to discuss games, tactics, teams, offers, all the boring junk."

"Oh... that clears a lot up," said Harry, who had wondered why his father was always rushing off to meetings. "Leila, do we have any house-elves?" he said, asking another question he'd been wondering about.

She looked at him oddly. "House-elves? Of course not. Mum's all into house-elf rights. She insists they should be paid, or not kept at all. I wish we had some. My friends at school are always talking about how dead useful they are. Then we'd never have to do dishes." She grimaced.

Harry grinned. Not only was his mum like Ginny, she was a lot like Hermione as well. "So, am I really awful at school or something?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

He rolled his eyes. "I used to have decent grades," he said softly, catching a glimpse of Lily in the living room. "I had mostly E's on my O.W.L.'s and an O in Defence Against the Dark Arts. But now I find out that I'm horrible at Defence and Transfiguration—I got A's on those O.W.L.'s—and no one expects me to be good at anything! You should hear some of the people... Mum and Dad when they found out I could make a Patronus, then Sirius at Animagus Lessons. He's always completely shocked when I get stuff right. Why?"

Leila bit her lip. "Harry," she finally said. "You're not bad. In fact, you're near the top of your class." Harry started to disagree, but she shushed him. "Quiet, Mum might be listening. No, I'm not joking. It's not you, Harry, it's the school. Hogwarts is going to rot. Mum and Dad say so all the time. McGonagall has fought for years to keep the standards raised, but Lucius Malfoy and that Umbridge lady—yes, she's still in the Ministry in this world too, don't look so shocked!—they've been lowering the difficulty of the classes little by little. O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s aren't as hard as they used to be, but even so, the students are much less prepared, and so everyone tends to do worse. They also rig the exams, I'm sure, to give pure-bloods higher grades. Malfoy only wants pure-bloods in office at the Ministry. Mum and Dad think it's all part of You-Know-Who's plan."

"But Moody," Harry sputtered, "he'd never lower his class standards, would he?"

Leila giggled. "That's the great part. Every time he has to teach Slytherins, or Umbridge or one of her cronies is around, he makes it look like he's teaching us exactly what the Ministry wants, but as soon as their backs are turned, he goes ahead with his own lesson agenda. We've learned all sorts of defensive spells and charms. No one would dare rat on Moody, they're too scared of him. And besides, it's everyone's favorite class." Her face fell. "But even so, you're not the best at Defence. No one is. Moody can raise the standards a little, but not too much or Slytherin spies at school will notice that some of the students know really advanced spells and report it to their parents, who will tell Malfoy. If Moody gets kicked out, he'll be replaced with a Ministry-appointed teacher."

Harry mulled these things over. Then Leila took out her wand, and with a simple flick, the dishes were instantly clean, and stacked in the drainer.

“Leila!”

“Shhhh! Mum will never know. We’ve been standing here long enough,” she said, motioning toward the stairway.

Harry obediently followed her up the stairway, but as he started to walk past her door to his room, she stopped him.

“I hate your room,” Leila stated bluntly. “Honestly, Quidditch is great, and all, but all those posters make me want to gag. Let’s talk in my room instead.”

Harry followed her through the door, and was met by a clash of shades of purple, lavender, and lime green. Leila’s bed was covered with pillows, and her walls held an assortment of posters, both Muggle and wizard. Harry recognized the Weird Sisters and a few other bands he’d heard Ginny and Ron talk about, but he wasn’t familiar with any of the Muggles on the posters that weren’t moving.

“Now *this* makes me want to gag,” he said with a grin, and ducked as Leila hurled a pillow at his head. “Who are all these people?”

“You don’t recognize any of the stars?” she said incredulously. “I thought you said you grew up with Muggles.”

“The Dursleys, remember? They never let me listen to music or watch TV. I recognize the Wizarding stars, but not the Muggles.”

Leila listed off the rock and TV celebrities for Harry, then confided, “But it’s really all about Orlando Bloom.” She pointed to the largest poster in the room, hanging on her door.

“Who?”

Leila rolled her eyes. “He’s just the hottest bloke ever to walk the earth. None of my friends at school know about him, except for Allie, who has a Muggle parent. She practically worships the ground he

walks on.” A sly grin crossed her face. “We were even plotting how to make him fall for one of us. We even thought about putting Disillusionment Charms on ourselves so we could get close enough to cast a love spell.”

“A *love* spell?”

“Don’t be such a prat, Harry. We’re wizards and witches. Why resort to Muggle methods of getting someone to like you when you’ve already got faster and more effective methods?”

Before Harry could reply to this, Leila had launched into a list of her favorite movies. “You watch movies?” he asked, feeling confused. “But...”

“Harry, our mum grew up *Muggle*, remember? She loves movies. We have a TV and VCR downstairs and a bunch of movies in the cabinet next to the sofas. I don’t understand why wizards don’t try more Muggle things now and then. I mean, Hogwarts is positively ancient compared to modern schools...”

Before she could get started on yet another topic, Harry butted in. “What animal do you think I should become for my Animagus lessons?”

They discussed the options for a few minutes, and in the end, Leila agreed that a bird—in particular, a falcon—would definitely fit Harry better than some of the other options they had considered—a raccoon, a cat, a dog, a wolf, a horse, a lion, and a snake. “So you’re going to start learning to actually transform tomorrow?” said Leila, looking excited.

“That’s what Sirius said. He thinks I’m ready.”

Leila looked like she had more questions to ask, but just then the phone began to ring, and she said pointedly, “It’s probably for me.” Harry took his cue and left.

“Remus?”

Lupin's tired face appeared in the mirror. "Hello, Harry."

"You won't believe what I found out today."

"Something that relates to the Horcruxes?" Lupin asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Maybe," said Harry. "I was at Grimmauld Place, and I got another look at that old Black family tapestry. Do you remember it?" Lupin nodded, and Harry continued. "You won't believe whose name I saw on it."

"Do tell, Harry."

"Regulus Black."

Lupin's face was blank. "Pardon me, but I still don't see the significance..."

"Regulus *Artemis* Black."

"That's nice, Harry, but he's dead..."

"Don't you get it? Remember the locket Dumbledore and I retrieved from the cave? The note inside?"

Lupin's eyes widened. "R.A.B.?"

"I think so. But that's only half of it. You know how the names always show the date of birth and death?"

"Yes, but like I said, he's..."

"There was no death date for Regulus Black."

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. "Harry," Lupin said slowly, "do you mean..."

"Yeah," said Harry grimly. "Regulus Black is still alive."

A/N: Here's a preview of the next chapter, entitled "Wormtail":

"We've been friends for a long time, Peter," said Sirius, moving to Pettigrew's other side.

"Best friends," James put in. "All through our years at Hogwarts."

"We always liked you, Peter, not because of your skills or talents, and definitely not because of your bravery," Lupin continued, "but because of your loyalty."

"So that's what we'd like to talk to you about now: Your loyalty," Sirius growled.

Coming soon, to a website near you!

Please review. And by "REVIEW" I don't mean, "Good story" or "I love it" reviews... Tell me *why* you like it or hate it.

By the way, I realize Orlando Bloom wasn't a famous actor back in 1997. Let's just pretend he was. I just love looking at him.

Chapter 16

The Order invitation arrived that evening. “Tomorrow night,” James said. “It’s at the Weasleys’ place.

“James? Do you think... Peter...” Lily said nervously.

“Quiet, Lily,” Harry’s dad said quickly, throwing a significant glance at Harry and Leila, who were seated at the table finishing off bowls of ice cream.

Lily and James moved into the living room to finish their conversation, and once they were gone, Leila rolled her eyes. “They treat me like a two-year-old sometimes. Honestly, I know more than they do, anyway.”

“Don’t tell them,” Harry said quickly.

“I won’t. Your secret is safe with me. I mean, they’d probably flip out if they knew that...”

“That Pettigrew had betrayed them and he was the reason for their deaths.”

Leila was silent. Then she said, “Is Lupin still looking for the third person in the Aperio?”

Harry nodded. “He’s set on fixing the realities, but I won’t let him,” he said firmly. “I wouldn’t want to lose you, Mum, Dad, and Sirius.”

“Good,” said Leila, and finished the last bite of her strawberry ice cream.

Harry found that transforming into an animal—a falcon, in his case—was much harder than simply changing his hair color or length, his height, or growing his fingernails. He and Sirius worked hard all the next morning, but still Harry couldn’t even grow a single talon. Sirius didn’t seem worried. “It takes time, Harry. Like I said, it took James and I two years to get as far as you’ve come. Just keep trying, and you’ll get it eventually.”

Harry tried to bring up Regulus again, but Sirius was pointedly avoiding the topic. By lunchtime, Harry was convinced that Sirius was hiding something significant.

"See you tonight," Sirius said when they reached Godric's Hollow. "Bye, Harry."

Harry waved, and watched his godfather apparate quickly away.

At ten-till-seven, James, Lily, and Harry apparated to the Burrow.

"Mum, why are the Order meetings held at different places?" Harry said as they walked up the lawn to the front door.

"It's always been like that," she said. "We change locations every week, simply for security. No one knows where the next meeting will be until the invitations arrive."

They reached the door. Molly Weasley was there, dishing out questions for the standard security check. A few moments later they stepped through the door into the very full Burrow. Lily and James were immediately called over by Frank Longbottom. Harry slipped through the crowd, looking for Lupin, but instead he ran straight into someone tall with red hair...

"Percy! What are you doing here?"

The taller boy looked down over his glasses. "Do I know you?"

The situation was ironic. Harry was so used to being recognized wherever he went that he wasn't sure how to respond.

"Um...I go to Hogwarts. I'm in Gryffindor."

"Oh, yes," said Percy. "You're the one I caught sneaking contraband Zonko's items into your dormitory when I was Head Boy."

"Er..." said Harry, who honestly couldn't think of anything to say.

"You're the Potter boy, right? Got a sister a year younger than you?"

"Yeah. Are Fred and George here?" Harry asked.

“Not yet. They’re in Diagon Alley,” Percy said, sniffing. “Trying to find a contractor to start some type of joke shop. Pure nonsense if you ask me...”

Harry made an excuse and got away before Percy could get started about the evils of having fun in times like these. He waded through the people, and finally found McGonagall, talking to Moody. “Professor McGonagall,” Harry interrupted. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Moody looked annoyed, but McGonagall consented, and Harry followed her into the empty kitchen.

“What is Percy doing here?” Harry asked bluntly.

McGonagall looked surprised. “He’s part of the Order. He couldn’t be here last week.”

“Part of the *Order*?” Harry said disbelievingly.

“Yes. Why?”

Harry quickly explained Percy’s other-reality attitude to the Order and his connections with the Ministry, and his own suspicions about Percy’s allegiance. When he had finished, McGonagall nodded. “That is understandable. But with Malfoy as Minister, Percy has been of two minds for years. The Ministry, or the Order? We didn’t trust him at first, even taking measures never to have Order meetings at the Burrow when he was home. Our suspicions were confirmed when Percy joined the Ministry right after his seventh year at Hogwarts. But when Charlie and Tonks were killed by Voldemort himself, Percy saw the error of his ways. He realized that the Ministry was doing nothing to abate the growing evil, and he offered himself to our side as a Ministry spy. Some still question his loyalties, but I for one am convinced that he is completely trustworthy.”

“And if he’s not?”

“He will be after he sees the diary tonight, and hears your testimony of how Ginny came to acquire it. Apart from Molly, I believe Percy was the most affected when Ginny was sent to Azkaban. He held

himself responsible for not keeping better watch over her, and I think to this day he still thinks that he could have done something to prevent her opening the Chamber of Secrets.”

“He couldn’t have, you know,” Harry said, suddenly feeling much more companionable toward Percy Weasley than he had in a long time.

“I know,” McGonagall said softly. “I just wish there was a way we could help Ginny.”

“There is,” Harry almost said, but he stopped himself in time. Only Leila knew of his plans to rescue Ginny. He didn’t trust anyone else with that information yet.

“Time to start,” Molly Weasley called, and as Harry turned, he saw Peter Pettigrew lingering in the background. Harry stiffened, and glanced back at McGonagall.

“We will take care of him if he indeed is a Death Eater,” she said grimly, and they followed the rest of the members into the Weasleys’ living room and found seats near the front.

Harry looked around. Almost everyone who had come to the initial Order meeting had come tonight. Neville’s grandmother was missing, as well as Elphias Doge, but in his place was a face Harry recognized--Mundungus Fletcher. Harry wondered if the rest of the members of the Order were to be informed about the Horcruxes.

Pettigrew came in last and started to sit in the back, but Lupin waved him forward. “Don’t be shy, Peter,” he called. “I saved you a seat up here.”

The conversation lessened a little as Pettigrew turned red. “You didn’t have to,” he said.

“Nonsense, Peter. Come join us,” Lupin said cheerfully.

Harry watched Mad-Eye Moody who was sitting across from Lupin. As Pettigrew moved closer, Moody looked him over, then gave Lupin a significant nod. Sirius and James stood and moved forward.

“Peter, we’ve got something to discuss with you tonight,” Lupin said pleasantly, standing as well and putting a hand on Pettigrew’s shoulder companionably.

Pettigrew looked nervously around at the Marauders. “What would that be?” he said, struggling to maintain the same friendly tone, but Harry could hear his voice shaking slightly.

“We’ve been friends for a long time, Peter,” said Sirius, moving to Pettigrew’s other side.

“Best friends,” James put in. “All through our years at Hogwarts.”

“We always liked you, Peter, not because of your skills or talents, and definitely not because of your bravery,” Lupin continued, “but because of your loyalty.”

“So that’s what we’d like to talk to you about now: Your loyalty,” Sirius growled.

Many of the Order members were looking confused and a few were whispering amongst themselves. Moody was looking smug, however, a characteristic scowl on his face. McGonagall looked sad, and Frank, Alice, Molly, and Arthur were watching, wide-eyed.

“M-my l-loyalty?”

“Yes,” said Lupin sadly. “We have reason to believe you’re not completely loyal to us anymore.”

“W-why w-would you think t-that?” Pettigrew said, nervously licking his lips.

“Because of this,” Sirius said, and with a jerk, he yanked up Pettigrew’s left sleeve.

Pettigrew yelped and struggled, but Lupin had grabbed his shoulder, and James quickly took Pettigrew’s other arm. Harry strained to get a glimpse. There it was, the Dark Mark, etched into Pettigrew’s forearm. Sirius slowly turned Pettigrew around in a full circle so everyone

could get a good look. There were gasps of dismay and anger from the onlookers.

"That's what we needed to discuss with you," said Lupin calmly.

Harry's dad reached up and wiped sweat from his brow. "Why would you do this to us, Peter? We're your friends..."

Sirius could obviously hold it in no longer. "You little rodent...vile, deceitful, double-crossing traitor..." he insulted, his voice rising.

"...and we trusted you," James continued.

"Why did you do it?" Sirius shouted, his face a dark mask of rage. "You've been an Order member for *eighteen* years. How long have you been spilling all our plans at Voldemort's feet?"

James's shoulders sagged. "We knew there was a leak in the Order, but I would've never guessed it was you," he said sadly.

"Yeah, all this time we were blaming Re..." Sirius stopped mid-sentence.

Lupin smiled complacently. "You thought it was me. I know."

Sirius looked stricken. "Remus, I'm sorry."

"It's in the past," Lupin said simply. He turned back to Pettigrew, whose eyes were darting back and forth. "You still haven't answered our questions, Peter."

The shorter balding man was looking more and more like a rat every moment. "J-James...R-Remus... The D-Dark L-Lord... is p-powerful..."

"And I suppose that was the perfect reason to go running off to support him, huh?" Sirius spat.

"I thought more of you," James said quietly, and Pettigrew's eyes widened

"I didn't mean...I didn't think..."

“Don’t even start making excuses,” Sirius barked. “You’re about to learn what happens to traitors in our circle.”

As on cue, the three pushed Pettigrew against the wall, and pointed their wands at him. Pettigrew was shaking now, but he managed to screw up his face in concentration. Harry recognized the expression. “Watch him,” he shouted, half rising from his chair. “He’s going to transform!”

But Pettigrew wasn’t changing. Sirius laughed, cold and hard. “Trying to run off just like the coward you are, huh?”

“It won’t work this time, Peter,” Lupin said, and James glanced at him oddly. Harry knew Lupin was remembering the disastrous Shrieking Shack incident several years before.

“Lily’s put a special charm she invented herself on this room,” James explained, turning his attention back to Pettigrew.

“No Animagus transformations,” Lupin said flatly.

“Irony, isn’t it? Once we helped you become an Animagus,” said Sirius, a cold glint in his dark eyes. “Now we’re going to ‘help’ you again.”

“W-what are you going to do?” Pettigrew squeaked anxiously.

There was no sympathy in Sirius’s voice. “Let’s just say that we’ll make sure you never go blabbing to old Voldie anymore.”

“You seem to have a lot of rodent characteristics,” James acknowledged coolly.

“We thought you’d make a good rat permanently,” said Lupin. “Again, our dear friend Lily has composed a spell for our use...”

The three raised their wands even higher. “On the count of three,” said James.

“Good bye, Peter,” said Lupin. “I will miss the friend I once knew, but it’s obvious there is no trace of him left in you.”

“One,” Sirius began, but he never reached two. Pettigrew threw himself forward, shoving Remus and James to the floor. Obviously none of them had been expecting Pettigrew to resort to Muggle methods. The smaller man landed a punch full in Lupin’s face, knocking him out, then pulled himself to his feet.

“Expeliarimus,” Sirius cried, but Pettigrew ducked. James tried to pull his wand on Pettigrew, but he kicked James in the stomach and left him gasping for air. Moody jumped to his feet, and shot a well aimed slicing curse that hit Pettigrew’s arm. “Stupefy! Reducto! Petrificus Totalis!” Sirius yelled as Pettigrew dashed towards the door, holding his arm and dodging spells while the Order members tried to stay out of the line of fire. Percy was hit with the Petrificus Totalis spell and froze in his seat, mouth wide open.

Harry jumped to his feet, and aimed another stunning spell at Pettigrew. “Someone, help!” Sirius shouted as Pettigrew disappeared through the door. Frank and Alice Longbottom seemed to have recovered their wits, and they quickly drew their own wands and followed. Harry dashed out as well, trailed by McGonagall and Moody. When Harry reached the front door, there was no sign of Pettigrew.

“Damn,” Sirius cursed. “He must have transformed. Moody, Harry, Frank, let’s search the grounds. Quickly, because if he gets outside the wards he’ll apparate away. Minerva, Alice, go inside and tell everyone to begin recasting their Fidelius Charms. If anyone has Peter as their Secret-keeper, they will be in grave danger unless the spell is renewed immediately.”

Harry, Moody, Sirius and Frank Longbottom searched for several minutes before a sharp crack echoed over the grounds. Sirius straightened and wiped the sweat from his face. “He escaped,” he said bitterly.

Frank Longbottom was panting. It was still hot, even though the sun was setting in the distance. “We tried, Sirius. Don’t blame yourself.”

“The vermin,” Sirius spat.

Moody limped over. “Can’t believe he got away. The room was full of Aurors,” he growled.

“Traitorous little parasite,” Sirius continued.

“We’d better go inside and break the news to the others,” Frank said grimly.

The others climbed the steps, but Harry stayed behind, looking out over the lawn, his fists clenched. That lying, dirty, double-crossing man was the reason for the Order’s failed plans. In the other reality, he was the reason for Sirius’s fourteen years in Azkaban, and the reason Harry had no parents. And now Harry had come face to face with Pettigrew four times and each time Pettigrew had gotten away. As Harry added yet another incident to his mental list of Pettigrew encounters, he silently vowed that next time he came across Peter Pettigrew, things would be different. This time Harry would get revenge.

Chapter 17

When Harry came back inside, Moody was waiting for him in the hall. "That was an impressive stunning spell you threw at Pettigrew back in the living room," the old Auror commented. "Much improved from your attempts last year in class."

Harry ducked his head shyly. "I practiced extra before I left school," he said, a grin spreading across his face.

"Good reflexes too," said Moody, focusing his magical eye on Harry.

Harry couldn't believe that Moody was complementing him. A part of him felt proud, but another part of him felt a little ashamed. He had mastered the stunning spell in his fourth year. *I must really stink at Defence class*, he thought sardonically.

Before he could respond, Bill and Arthur Weasley burst out of the adjacent room. "We're off to strengthen the wards," said Bill.

"Want to help, Mad-Eye?" Mr. Weasley invited.

Moody nodded. "When we're done, no Death Eater will be able to get through," he growled.

Harry slipped away into the living room. The scene was chaotic. Wizards and witches were bunched together everywhere, casting new Fidelius Charms. People were popping in and out of the fire by the Floo Network, and to Harry's surprise, Lily left the room and came back a few minutes later followed by a very confused-looking Leila.

Suddenly Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Lupin, sporting a developing black eye but otherwise looking healthy. "Why is Leila..." Harry started, but Lupin cut in.

"Will you come here for a moment, Harry?"

Harry followed Lupin out of the living room into the kitchen. "Why is Leila here?" Harry asked again.

“A Fidelius Charm cannot be cast over a building when people are present. If there is someone inside when the spell is cast, that person will suddenly forget where he is, why he is there, and how to get out of the house. This can have some damaging effects on the mind. But I have something more important to discuss with you.”

“What is it?”

“Will you be my Secret-keeper?”

“*What?*” Harry exclaimed, certain he had heard wrong.

“I want you to be my Secret-keeper when the Fidelius is cast over my current residence.”

“Me? I...Why me?”

Lupin smiled faintly. “I would have thought that part would be clear. You are the only other person I am aware of from the other reality. Therefore, I have much more to trust you with than anyone else here. It is only natural that I would have you to be my Secret-keeper. You’ve proven yourself worthy of the role in many ways.”

“I don’t even know where your residence is,” Harry said, taken aback at the risk Lupin was taking. What was he thinking, making a student his Secret-keeper?

“Once the spell is performed, you will know, and you’ll have to remind me. I will have forgotten.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite. Will you do it?”

Harry paused uncertainly. “I’m not even of age yet,” he said.

“Has that ever stopped you before?” Lupin said, his eyes twinkling.

“Touché,” Harry said, grinning. “I’d be glad to.”

Lupin called McGonagall into the kitchen, and she agreed to cast the charm. Harry and Lupin clasped hands as McGonagall waved her

wand, muttering long strings of spells under her breath. Then a white light began glowing from their hands, and suddenly Harry knew without a doubt that Lupin lived at number twenty-three Townsend Road in Liverpool. "It worked, didn't it?" he asked once the light had faded.

Lupin nodded, and Harry told him where he lived, and also wrote out a piece of paper like the one Harry had used to get into Sirius's house for Lupin to keep. "I think it would be best for you not tell your parents you are my Secret-keeper unless they specifically ask," Lupin advised as the three walked back into the living room

A half hour later, Bill, Moody, and Arthur appeared. "The wards are up," Mr. Weasley announced.

"I'd like to see a Death Eater get through those defenses," said Moody, falling heavily into the chair next to the fire.

"Even the best Curse Breaker would need days to pull those wards down," said Bill proudly. He took a seat next to the black witch Harry recognized from the last meeting. She immediately leaned over and began whispering in his ear.

"Good," said Lupin, looking relieved. "As soon as we are done tonight, Arthur, you can renew your Fidelius Charm, but until then you should be safe."

"Is there more to do?" Mr. Weasley asked, surprised.

"I brought evidence," Lupin said quietly.

Arthur Weasley's eyes widened, but he nodded and began going from group to group, talking quietly to the Order members. Soon the various family members began apparating or flooing out. Lily left with Leila, who shot Harry a "Tell me later or so help me I'll..." look before she followed her mum out the door. Moody quickly performed the Fidelius with Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Mr. Weasley helped Bill become Kiara's Secret-keeper. Finally the members had regrouped into the original circle.

Lupin stood nervously. "Now that we have taken care of that first nasty piece of business, there is something else I need to bring to your attention."

He quickly filled the rest of the Order members in about the Horcruxes, then told them of the private Order meeting that had been held the week before. "I do hope you'll forgive me," he apologized. Some of the excluded people were shooting angry glances at him. "At the time, I only had theories," Lupin explained hastily. "I presented my ideas to a smaller group because I wasn't completely sure, but also because I had my suspicions about Pettigrew and didn't want him to learn any information that he could have taken straight to Voldemort regarding our knowledge or plans." He sighed. "Even so, he got away."

"It wasn't your fault," said Emmeline Vance softly. "The rest of us could've done something. But we just sat here."

"We did what we could," said McGonagall.

Lupin was silent for a moment before continuing. "When I presented my ideas to the smaller group they asked me to bring evidence for my theories. And I have." He pulled the diary from his pocket and slapped it on the coffee table.

"An old book?" came a dismissive voice from the back..

"Not a book," said Shacklebolt, who was closer. He leaned forward to get a better look. "A diary."

"Tom Riddle's diary," Lupin corrected.

"Who?" said Kiara. Several others were looking confused.

"Tom Riddle," said Minerva McGonagall, "is Lord Voldemort's former name, the one he went by before he became what he is today. He was a student at Hogwarts before Dumbledore became Headmaster, and I was still teaching Arithmancy. He was one of the best students Hogwarts has ever seen, and a favourite among the teachers. While at Hogwarts he did extensive research about his heritage and

discovered that he was one of the last of Salazar Slytherin's line, which explained his ability to speak Parseltongue."

"He found out about the Chamber of Secrets and discovered his ability to open it. In the process, a girl was killed, and Riddle framed another student," Lupin explained.

"So Hagrid was guiltless," said Lily, letting out her breath.

"He was guilty of bringing a baby Acromantula into the castle, but that was all. He never opened the Chamber," McGonagall said grimly. "Of course, the teachers believed Riddle over Hagrid. In reality, though, the monster in the Chamber is not an Acromantula, but a Basilisk. I have been in the Chamber and seen the skin of the giant serpent. I have spoken to the ghost of Myrtle Callaway myself and heard her testimony. It is all true."

Mrs. Weasley leaned forward, her face white. "Then how... How did Ginny..."

"Manage to open the Chamber?" Lupin finished. "Especially when one takes into consideration the fact that only Slytherin's heir is supposed to be able to call forth the Basilisk?" Mrs. Weasley nodded and gulped.

"The diary is the key," Lupin expounded. "Evidently Voldemort wasn't content with opening the Chamber once. The diary is a Horcrux, a piece of Voldemort's soul, but it is also a very powerful dark object. Writing in the diary allows Voldemort to possess the writer, and through his unsuspecting victim, Voldemort can let the Basilisk loose again at Hogwarts. Watch." Lupin gave a quick demonstration, allowing each Order member to get a look at the words fading into the page, "My name is Tom Riddle."

Harry noticed that all the Weasleys had gone pale. Mr. Weasley was grasping Molly's shoulders, Percy was looking like he might be sick, Bill was holding Kiara's hand tightly, and the twins kept glancing nervously at each other. "So you're saying... This diary is why Ginny's in..." Mr. Weasley seemed to be incapable of uttering the word 'Azkaban.' "But how could she have acquired it?" he said quickly.

"I know how," Harry confessed, and everyone stared at him. "In my second year I was in Flourish and Blotts and I saw Lucius Malfoy slip the diary into Ginny's cauldron." It was true for the most part, he reasoned. He just hoped his parents didn't start questioning the fine details of his story.

"You...did?" Molly whispered. "And you said nothing?"

Harry felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Was he to be blamed for Ginny's imprisonment? "I didn't know what it was. At the time I thought maybe I hadn't been seeing straight. I didn't recognize it until I saw the diary in the...Until I saw it tonight," he corrected himself quickly.

A strangled noise came from the back. "Mum, don't blame Harry," Percy choked. "It's not his fault. It's mine." Fred and George began to protest, but Percy plowed on, his voice shaking. "I saw her writing in that old diary. I saw her become more and more reserved, and I did nothing."

"It's not all your fault," cried George, jumping to his feet.

"We share the blame," put in Fred, standing too.

"We saw her writing in the diary too."

"We should have done something."

"Ron noticed too, but he didn't intervene."

Harry watched, amazed. Never before had he witnessed the twins actually standing up for Percy. *This is how it ought to be*, he thought ruefully, wondering if the other-reality Percy would ever come to his senses, and wondering if his family would ever forgive him.

"Boys," said Mr. Weasley quietly. "What's done is done."

"No!" Mrs. Weasley suddenly cried. "Now we have proof! She was innocent after all, and the diary is evidence! We can go to the Ministry! They'll have to let my baby out of Azkaban..." She

convulsed into great heaving sobs, and Mr. Weasley tried to comfort her.

“Absolutely not.” But it wasn’t Lupin who spoke, but Moody. He leaned forward, his one good eye soft and compassionate. “We can’t go to the Ministry and accuse Lucius Malfoy to his face. It would backfire, one of us will end up with your daughter in Azkaban for possession of Dark items, and then where would we be? The minister would love to see another Weasley imprisoned, or a Potter,” Mad-Eye added, shooting a significant glance at Harry, who involuntarily shuddered.

“Then there is nothing we can do,” said Mr. Weasley despairingly.

“There is something,” said Lupin firmly as he watched the Weasleys, his face lined with pity. “We can put our full effort into finding and destroying the remaining Horcruxes. We can make Voldemort mortal again, and do our part to defeat him.”

Arthur Weasley looked up. “I will do anything,” he said hoarsely.

“Tell us how we can help,” said Moody.

“You give the orders,” said Shacklebolt, and several people nodded in agreement.

Lupin looked surprised, but with a quick glance at Harry, he pulled himself together and started into detail about the identity and locations of various Horcruxes. Once the explanations were over, he dished out assignments. Moody and Shacklebolt, two of the most accomplished Aurors, were to retrieve the locket from the cave. McGonagall, Lily Potter, and a witch Harry didn’t know were assigned the job of researching old objects of Ravenclaw’s and Gryffindor’s that could have been turned into Horcruxes. Frank and Alice Longbottom, skilled Aurors in their own right, were to go to the remains of the house of Gaunt, accompanied by Emmeline Vance, a skilled healer, in search of Slytherin’s ring. Bill and Kiara, who to Harry’s surprise was also an Auror, were assigned the job of finding Voldemort’s old orphanage and checking it for Horcruxes.

“What about us?” said James and Sirius, looking a little put out that Lupin hadn’t assigned them a task yet.

“I’ve saved the best job for you,” said Lupin, looking truly cheerful for the first time that night. “You are to do what Marauders do best—create a diversion. I need you to work with the remaining Order members to find a way to distract Voldemort’s Death Eaters. They must not know what we’re really up to. Keep them guessing at our plans.”

Sirius and James exchanged almost gleeful looks.

“Those of you who work at the Ministry,” Lupin continued, glancing at Arthur and Percy, “keep both ears open for anything that might be of use to us.”

The meeting broke up soon after. Lupin kept certain people back to give them more information about their assignments. Harry overheard him giving Moody and Shacklebolt cautionary details about the cave, the potion, and the Ineri. The two Aurors left with set faces.

“Harry,” Sirius called as Harry started to follow his parents out. “By the way, you live at Number Nine, Godric’s Drive.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, grinning. “See you tomorrow.”

Chapter 18

The next two weeks passed slowly. Lupin, no matter how hard Harry begged, remained firm in his decision to let the older, more experienced Order members do the immediate Horcrux hunting.

“It’s not fair,” said Harry, his bottom lip curling into a pout. He was having another argument with his former teacher via the two-way mirror. “I’m the brains of the operation. In fact, without me there would be no operation, but I’m being forced to sit here idly twiddling my thumbs while everyone else gets to have the adventures.”

Lupin smiled condolingly. “Life isn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that you had to grow up an orphan, or that I was bitten by a werewolf when I was small. Even though it may not seem like you’re doing much, you’ve got the most important job of all.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked sulkily.

“You’re keeping our cover secure. Do you think the Order would believe us if we marched into the next meeting and claimed to be victims of an Aperio from another reality in which you were the Chosen One and destined to single-handedly defeat Lord Voldemort?”

“No,” Harry admitted. It sounded too fantastic to believe when Lupin put it that way. “They’d send us off to St. Mungo’s for insanity.”

“Exactly,” said Lupin. “And this is why you’re going to continue acting like nothing’s wrong. On the first of September you’ll board the Hogwarts Express like any other seventh year. Suspicions would arise if you started doing things out of the ordinary, and at all costs our secret must be kept safe.”

Harry whined, pleaded, reasoned, shouted, and sulked, but in the end, it was the only rational thing to do. With nothing better to occupy his time, he threw himself into his Animagus training, practicing for hours in the afternoons. Lily and James were gone most of the time: Lily, to the wizarding libraries, and James, to Grimmauld Place where he and Sirius were planning the Great Distraction, as Harry and Leila called it.

With all the extra time to practice, Harry progressed quickly and by the end of two weeks, he was able to completely transfigure into a falcon, though he could only hold the shape for a few seconds. Sirius was ecstatic. Animagus lessons, though, were becoming farther and farther apart as the plans Sirius was working on with James began to take up more of his time. Harry didn't know how his godfather was managing to do it all: Lessons with Harry, plans with James, and Sirius's Ministry job. One day he asked.

"Oh, that," Sirius said, laughing. "I quit the Ministry job right after our first New Order meeting."

Harry stared at him. "Why?"

"I hated it," Sirius said casually. "Besides," he added darkly, "it's not like I need the money. That damned fortune my dear old mum left me..."

"What will you do now?"

"I didn't tell you?" Sirius looked surprised. "I suppose I didn't. Madame Hooch is retiring. McGonagall offered me her position."

"You're coming to Hogwarts?" Harry almost shouted.

Sirius smiled slyly. "If you'd rather I stayed here I can go ask for my Ministry job back..."

"No, that's not what I meant," said Harry, grinning so widely he thought his cheeks would split. "That's awesome!"

"I'm glad you think so," Sirius said, winking. Harry was already planning the things he and his godfather could do together at Hogwarts as they dove back into the Animagus lessons.

When he wasn't practicing or moping, Harry found he quite enjoyed spending time with Leila. One day he cornered her and begged her to help him practice Quidditch.

"I'm going to make a fool of myself if I go back to school and can't block goals if my life depended on it," he pleaded. "Lupin says no one

can find out about the Aperio, but if I used to be good and suddenly in my seventh year I turn up and I'm a lousy Keeper, someone's going to guess something."

"Who said you were ever good?" she said with a smirk, but finally she consented. From then on, Harry spent a good hour each day practicing Quidditch with his sister. His first impressions of her skills weren't at all wrong; she was a marvelous Chaser, even better than Ginny. Of course, she went easy on him at first, until he began to catch on to the whole Keeper thing. They practiced hard and one day at the end of a week, Leila landed, pushed her messy hair out of her face, and said, "Not bad, Potter, I suppose you'll do."

"Not bad? That's all I get for seven days of grueling torture from you?"

"What did you expect? Oh, Harry, you're better than Elijah Pullman, Uraiah Yates *and* Ronald Weasley!" she said in a high-pitched voice.

Harry scowled until she gave him a good-natured punch on the shoulder. "You know what I mean, *brother dear*. Sure, you're not up to par yet, but I'll get you there."

When they weren't playing Quidditch, Harry asked her loads of questions about himself. "Have we always lived in Godric's Hollow? Where did I go to school before I went to Hogwarts? Did Dad teach me to be a Keeper, or did I just choose that position?" Leila quickly got tired of answering his inquiries after a while, and resorted to giving him the silent treatment when he abused the privilege.

July was slowly drawing to a close. The weather had been sunny and hot for days on end. The sky occasionally graced by big puffy white clouds that hinted of rain, but never obliged. One day when Sirius dropped Harry off after a very successful Animagus lesson, Harry pushed open the door and was met with by a crowd of people screaming "Surprise!" and "Happy Birthday!" Sirius shoved the dazed Harry through the door and shut it. It seemed like most of the Order members were present, along with the entire Weasley family and... Neville?

“Hi, Harry,” said the round-faced Gryffindor, grinning broadly and shoving a brightly-wrapped package into Harry’s arms. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, still stunned.

“You prat,” Leila cried, appearing at Harry’s side and smacking him on the arm. “You totally forgot it was your birthday, didn’t you?”

Harry glared at her as the rest of the people began to laugh. He didn’t want to admit it, but she was right.

“And your seventeenth birthday, at that. For shame, Harry,” said James.

“This is the most important birthday of all,” said Sirius. “Now you can do magic, Apparate, drink Firewhiskey...”

“Sirius!” Lily exclaimed. “If you slip Harry a drop of Firewhiskey tonight, so help me I will hex you into the next century!”

Sirius sobered at this thought, and nodded chastely, but when Lily wasn’t looking he winked and mouthed, “Later.”

The crowd drew Harry into the living room, which had been magically enlarged to fit all the people. On a table in the centre was a giant cake, decorated with red and gold frosting. Huge flashing words on the surface read, “HAPPY 17TH BIRTHDAY HARRY!” Miniature Quidditch players were chasing each other around the edge, aiming a miniscule Quaffle for a goal perched at the top of the cake.

On another table near the wall were presents—more presents than Harry had ever seen before in his life. “Are those all for me?” he murmured to Leila, who was still at his side.

“Yeah,” she said, analyzing the stack. “I’d say you’ve got about twenty-eight or so. That’s loads more than Mum and Dad sent me on my last birthday,” she continued, her face darkening into a scowl.

“You can have some of mine,” Harry said sincerely. “I won’t know what to do with them all.”

She looked curiously at him, but didn't say any more about the presents. Harry was still looking in awe at the mountain of packages when Leila suddenly gripped his arm. "Uh oh. You'd better watch out. Ron's here."

Harry spun around and saw the lanky red-head lurking in the doorway, his arms crossed. "I'll bet his mother made him come," Leila said, biting her lip. "He looks like he's up to no good. He's hated you ever since..."

"I know, I know, Fred and George told me," Harry said, cutting into her explanation. "I'm not afraid of Ron. I'm loads better at curses and hexes than he is, anyway."

Now Ron was scowling at him. "He's glaring at me," Harry said to Leila.

"I would too if you'd taken my date."

"I don't think *you* have to ever worry about that," he joked, and she smacked him on the arm again.

"Git. Just watch out, OK?"

"I can handle Ron," said Harry confidently, before Sirius called him over for a picture. Mrs. Weasley had brought a wizard camera and seemed to be in a much better mood than the last time Harry had seen her. He squeezed in front of the cake with his parents and godfather and pasted on a cheesy grin while the camera snapped picture after picture.

"I can't believe you're seventeen, Harry," Lily said, once the pictures were over.

James and Sirius exchanged glances. "Yeah," said Sirius in mock sadness. "Just yesterday you were crawling around the house naked making messes..."

"All those nappies I had to change," James chimed in, wiping away a fake tear. "I'll never forget..."

“Shut it, you two,” Lily growled. “Neither of you ever changed any nappies. You left that marvelous job to me.” She turned back to Harry, and ran a hand through his hair. “You grew so fast... I can’t believe my baby’s finally come of age.”

Harry could feel his face growing hot. He desperately searched for an escape while James and Sirius reminisced about the particularly embarrassing moments of Harry’s childhood. Finally when Alice Longbottom announced that they’d forgotten a knife to cut the cake, Harry nearly shouted, “I’ll get it!” and made a quick escape to the kitchen.

He rushed out the door, followed by laughter, and ran smack into a tall scowling boy.

“Umph,” Harry grunted. Pulling himself together, he took two steps back. Ron took his time unfolding his lanky limbs, the whole time glowering at Harry.

“Potter,” Ron said, as if he’d been forced to use an unpleasant word.

“Ron,” Harry acknowledged, refusing to stoop to the surname level.

“So, you done counting all your birthday presents? How many’d you get, Potter?”

“I wasn’t counting my presents,” Harry countered, trying to stay calm.

“Precious Potter always gets what he wants,” Ron sneered.

“Do not,” Harry said automatically. If only Ron knew... He sighed. This was getting nowhere. “Listen, Ron, your brothers told me why you’re upset, and I’m sorry about Cho. I didn’t realize what I was doing.”

Suddenly the taller boy had grabbed his collar and pushed him hard against the wall. “You bloody well knew what you were doing,” he snarled, his face only inches from Harry’s.

“Sod off,” Harry said, trying to remain calm, but not succeeding. If he only could reach his wand...but Ron had trapped his arms. “I don’t even like her anymore,” he said desperately.

It was the wrong thing to say. “Bastard! Bloody wanker!” Ron all but shouted. “You’re a sodding player. Using girls then dumping them is just something that you’d do, Potter.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Harry was able to choke out, but Ron wasn’t listening. He looked angry enough to hit Harry, but suddenly Ron was being hauled off of Harry by two identical red-heads.

“Oi, Ron, what d’you think you’re doing?” said Fred angrily.

George shook his head. “We thought’d you’d do something like this.”

“Sorry we didn’t get here faster, Harry,” said Fred as Harry straightened.

“Ickle-Ronnykins is so predictable,” George said, scowling at his younger brother.

“Get off me,” Ron snarled, shaking the twins away. “This isn’t over, Potter.”

Harry watched sadly as his once best friend stomped out the door and apparated away.

“Don’t worry about him,” said George condolingly.

“Y’know, if you want revenge, we’d be glad to offer you a selection from our joke shop inventions,” Fred offered. “Special discount for your birthday.”

“Thanks, but it’s alright. I’ll deal with Ron myself.”

Fred and George exchanged looks. “We admire your chivalry, Harry,” Fred said sarcastically.

“But Ron’s just a bit stronger than you,” finished George.

“We’d recommend bodyguards,” Fred said, nodding.

"It's alright," Harry repeated. "I'll be fine. I'll just be on the lookout, OK?"

After a while, Sirius called, "Harry, come open your presents!"

Harry came, a little hesitantly, but with the encouragement of the crowd, he began tearing open the parcels and packages. Lupin had bought him a book on time travel, and Sirius, a book on Animagus transformations (though it was charmed to look like another Transfiguration book). Neville's present turned out to be a small plant, with little silver leaves. "It's a Lejunim tree," Neville said excitedly as Harry examined the potted bush from every angle.

"Thanks!" Harry said, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Leila's was next, a small box with noise emitting from it. He lifted the lid, and found a sneak-o-scope, whirling wildly and flashing red.

"Cool," Harry said, lifting the device from the box.

"It's not your real present," Leila hissed. "The real one's upstairs. This is just a cover."

The next package that was shoved into his arms was from the twins. The sneak-o-scope suddenly began whirling so quickly that it was just a red blur emitting the high-pitched warning noise. "OK, what did you two put in my present?" Harry said suspiciously.

Fred and George tried to look innocent. "Nothing, Harry."

Harry glared at them, then set the package aside. He certainly wasn't going to open it now. He'd probably turn into a canary, or worse.

"Open mine next," said a tall black boy Harry didn't know.

Harry pulled the wrapping off and found a broom servicing kit like the one Hermione had given him in his third year. "Wow! Thanks..."

"Jeremy," Leila prompted in his ear.

"Thanks, Jeremy! This is awesome!"

Finally Harry had almost worked his way to the bottom of the mound of presents. His favorite present so far, though he'd never admit it, was the sweater Mrs. Weasley had knitted him. It was dark blue with a gold "H" on the front. As Harry laid it aside and shot Mrs. Weasley a grateful smile, Lily and James pressed a long box into his hands.

Harry tore the wrapping off and to his amazement he found a Firebolt underneath the paper. "Mum, Dad," he said weakly, examining the broom. "Wow... thanks..."

"We know you've needed a better broom for years," said Lily. "It's not a Thunderclap 3400, but Firebolts are still decent brooms..."

"Use it well," said James, grinning. "If you don't win the House Cup this year, I might have to take it back..."

Harry couldn't stop smiling as he ran his fingers over the smooth body of the broom. "This is incredible!"

"Maybe next time you try a Wronski Fient you won't crash land," Sirius joked.

The party broke up several hours later. As Harry said goodbye to the last of his guests, Leila appeared next to him.

"Who's Jeremy?" Harry said softly, voicing the question he'd been wondering about all afternoon.

"He's a seventh year Gryffindor. He's in your dormitory," she said. "You've never met him before?"

"He wasn't in my year in the other reality," Harry explained. "Where's he from?"

"He moved here from America and transferred into Hogwarts from Salem," she said. "You'd better be nicer to him next time we see him."

"Why?"

"He's practically your best friend."

“Good to know,” Harry said, making a mental note.

Once the last guest had left, Harry and Leila joined Lily as she cleaned the living room and vanished the remains of the birthday cake and wrappings. Leila helped Harry gather the armloads of presents and carry them up to his room.

“I’ve never had so many gifts in my life,” Harry said absent-mindedly as he laid broom on the top of the stack next to his wardrobe.

“What did the Dursleys do on your birthday?” Leila asked curiously.

“Usually ignored it, if I was lucky, but sometimes they’d remember and give me an old sock or clothes hanger or something stupid,” he replied. “My best presents were from Ron, Hermione and Hagrid. And Sirius.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” Harry said, lost in thought. “I had two of the best friends a bloke could ask for, an awesome godfather, a beautiful girlfriend... and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley practically adopted me. I didn’t care about the Dursleys.”

“You were lucky,” Leila said, looking away.

“I’m lucky now,” Harry said firmly, placing the last present on the stack and heading for the door.

Chapter 19

Harry waited impatiently for the next Order meeting. He was dying to know how the Horcrux hunt was going, but Lupin could tell him nothing, as the Order members had sworn not to discuss the Horcruxes amongst themselves. Only in meetings could they be completely sure that their conversations were not being overheard. A week after Harry's birthday, an invitation arrived.

"I wonder if Mum has found anything about Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's old artifacts," Harry said to Leila late that night, after their parents had gone to bed. He considered himself the sole exception to the no-talking rule. He knew his room was secure—this time he had been the one to cast Silencing Charms around his parents' room. "More legal than you doing it," he had told a sulking Leila. Now, she was curled up on the end of his bed, eyes wide.

"I want to help," Leila said, drawing her knees up to her chest.

"You are helping," said Harry wryly, thinking of Lupin. "I wouldn't be surviving without you."

She sighed restlessly. "But I want to do more."

Harry said nothing, knowing from experience that condolences would only make her feel worse.

Suddenly Leila gasped. "Your birthday present! I completely forgot to give it to you!" She jumped off the bed and darted through the open door. A moment later she was back, lugging a medium-sized package. She practically threw the box at him before heaving herself back onto the bed. "Well, open it," she urged.

Harry tore the paper off. The bright moonlight revealed a large black book. Silver words on the cover read "A Wizard's Guide to Azkaban."

"It's got maps and diagrams and a full description of where the prison's located," Leila said.

"This is awesome, Leila," Harry said fervently, flipping through the book. Finally he closed it, elated that his dream of saving Ginny might finally be coming true. The moonbeams danced on the silver engravings.

Moonbeams.

The moon.

Horried, Harry leaned over to look out the window. He could see the full circle of moon hanging over the roof of the next-door house.

"Lupin!" Harry gasped. "Full moon..."

"Calm down," Leila said, laughing. "He's fine. Mum's been making Wolfsbane for him for years now. She owls him the potion and he just takes it and curls up in front of the fireplace for a few days. The last full moon is tonight, so he'll be able to come to the Order meeting."

Harry relaxed. "That's good. I was really worried for a second there."

Leila grinned, but said nothing. Several companionable minutes of silence passed before she cleared her throat softly. "I got a letter today."

Harry looked up, interested. "From who?"

"Theodore Nott," she said, lifting her chin defiantly.

"*What?* I thought you were over him!" Harry all but shouted.

"I'm not," she said icily. "He's a nice bloke, and not at all into the pureblood junk the rest of the Slytherins are always spouting off about."

"His father's a Death Eater!"

"Honestly, Harry, do you always have to judge people by their relatives?" Leila exclaimed, eyes flashing. "Think about our dad. He was the biggest git at Hogwarts during his school days. Mum told me so."

It was the equivalent to having cold water thrown in his face. She had a point, Harry thought miserably, thinking again of his experience in Snape's Pensieve. If he went around judging people by their parents, friends, or siblings, he was every bit as bad as his old Potions teacher who for years had held James's school crimes over Harry's head.

"Besides," she said in a dangerous voice, "if you tell Mum and Dad I'm seeing Theodore, I'll tell them *everything*."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. "You wouldn't," Harry breathed, feeling the blood drain from his face.

"I would," she said determinedly.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice, do I?" he finally said, resignedly.

"Damn right, you don't," she said, but her eyes were sparkling again.

"Bribery," Harry sighed. "Typical girl..."

"Oh, no you don't," she said, firing up again. "I've been waiting for a year to get some dirt on you so I could start going out with Theodore again without having to worry about you telling on me."

Harry grinned at her. "Like I said, typical girl."

She pounded him with the nearest pillow she could reach. "Seriously, Leila," Harry said, sobering. "Be careful, OK? I swear, if he hurts you, he'll wish he was dead when I get through with him."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. He was always better at dueling than you."

"Not anymore," Harry growled, and she laughed.

"I forgot. I'll tell him to watch his back."

The Order meeting was held at Grimmauld Place. Harry suspected that Lupin had picked Sirius's house for a reason. Maybe coercion, if the locket came back a fake with a note from R.A.B. in it.

Harry sat next to Fred and George in the circle. Lupin was at the front again, looking paler than usual, but cheerful as he called each group forward to report.

"We found Riddle's orphanage," said Bill proudly.

"We'll go visit it soon," said Kiara. "We just located it a few days ago, and we need to figure out how to search it without Muggle detection."

"Good, good," said Lupin, making some notes on a piece of parchment. "What about Frank, Alice, and Emmeline?"

In reply, Frank stepped forward, holding a metal box. "The ring's in here," he said. "We haven't destroyed the Horcrux. We weren't sure how."

"The whole place was booby-trapped," Alice said. "We would've been killed if we hadn't had Emmeline there."

The dark-haired witch blushed.

"Marvelous," said Lupin, laying the box on the table. "How's the research going?"

"Nothing yet," said McGonagall.

"Minerva, Felicia, and I have looked for weeks," said Lily, looking crestfallen. "All the books say that Ravenclaw's remaining possessions were destroyed in a fire in 1750, and the only known artifact of Gryffindor's is his sword, which is secure at Hogwarts."

"I'm certain it has to be one of their artifacts," said Lupin. "Look for loopholes, stories that don't make much sense, and unproved theories. Next time can you bring a list of the possible items a Horcrux might be made of, even if they technically don't exist anymore?"

Lily nodded, and Lupin turned to Moody and Shacklebolt. "Did you find the locket?"

Moody stood stiffly and limped forward. Reaching inside his coat pocket he pulled out a silver locket and held it up for everyone to see. "It's a hoax, not a Horcrux," he spat, flinging the locket onto the table next to the box.

Lupin nodded, his shoulders sagging. "I was fearful that it wouldn't be. Unfortunately the only way to find out was to venture into the cave. Very well. At least we now know where the Horcrux isn't. Did you find any evidence of who the individual was who got there before us?"

"Just this note," said Moody, holding it up.

Harry listened as Moody read the words Harry had committed to memory months before.

To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this

but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret.

I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match,

you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

The room was deathly silent when Moody finished. Lupin looked up. "Does anyone have any idea who this R.A.B. could be?"

Harry watched Sirius across the room. His godfather was looking very uncomfortable. Lupin noticed too.

"Sirius?" Lupin prompted. "Do you know something?"

There was a long tense moment before Sirius replied. "I know who it is."

"Would you care to disclose that information?" said Lupin softly.

Sirius let out a long breath. "He does not wish me to tell you, but I will," he said slowly. "The time has come."

Harry watched, waiting expectantly. Sirius wiped sweat off his forehead before continuing. "Many of you may remember my younger brother, Regulus Black." There were nods and murmurs of agreement. "He became a Death Eater soon after he left school, but supposedly became frightened and backed out a few years later, only to be murdered at Voldemort's command. That story isn't true. It was an alibi for safety reasons. In reality, Regulus did something to anger Voldemort, then fled. He successfully hid for two and a half years, but in late 1981, he was discovered and had nowhere left to flee. He had only one remaining immediate relative who hadn't gone to the dark side. Me.

"He showed up on my doorstep in the middle of the night, with the Death Eaters not minutes behind. He begged for shelter, but only told me that he had done something worthy of death in Voldemort's eyes. He declared his loyalty to our side, and said that the item he'd destroyed would make Voldemort's defeat possible.

"Against my better judgment, I admitted him, then flooed over to Lily and James's place. I told them it was urgent for a Fidelius Charm to be cast over my residence immediately, and they obliged, though I didn't tell them why. James became my Secret-keeper, and Regulus wasn't discovered by the Death Eaters."

So that was why Regulus had survived. Now it made sense to Harry. Voldemort had never killed his parents, so Sirius hadn't ended up in Azkaban and had been there to help his brother in the time of need. When Regulus had needed a place to hide, he had found it at Grimmauld Place.

"So that's why you showed up in the middle of the night," said Lily, leaning back in her chair. "I always wondered. You told us it was urgent, but we never figured out why."

“So what’s become of Regulus now?” Lupin pressed.

“He has been hiding upstairs for sixteen years, though he ventures out sometimes, well-disguised. Most of the Death Eaters believe he’s dead, and I think that’s what they told Voldemort when he returned to power.

“Naturally, I was shocked to hear that Remus here has been getting information from Death Eaters who may potentially wish to change sides,” Sirius finished, glancing at Lupin. “I thought maybe he’d been communicating with Regulus.”

Lupin smiled faintly. “But he did destroy the Horcrux, did he not?”

Sirius nodded. “That’s what he told me. I’ll ask him after you leave. I could ask him to join us, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea,” Sirius finished, looking significantly at the Weasleys. Molly’s face was pale and pinched.

Harry nudged Fred. “Why not?” he hissed.

“Regulus Black was involved in the fight that ended with the death of Mum’s brothers,” Fred said tightly.

“He also killed Benjy Fenwick personally,” George added, scowling darkly. “Blasted him to little bits, I heard.”

“How do we know we can trust him?” Moody growled.

“He fought against us for years,” Emmeline said, twisting her hair nervously.

“I think this note pretty much proves his loyalty,” said Lupin firmly. “Besides, we need him. Right now, he’s the only one we know who’s ever successfully destroyed a Horcrux. We still have the ring and diary to get rid of, and more Horcruxes to come.”

Several people nodded. “You do have a point there,” Moody admitted.

“Are we agreed then? We’ll accept any help Regulus Black can give us regarding the Horcruxes?”

“Agreed,” said James, and Shacklebolt, the Longbottoms, McGonagall, and several other people quickly voiced their approval.

“Molly?” Lupin said gently.

Mrs. Weasley looked up. Her face was set. “If we must,” she said bravely.

“Good then,” said Lupin, and the meeting ended.

Chapter 20

Summer was beginning to wind down for Harry. There was only one week left until the Hogwarts Express departed for Hogwarts. It had been in many ways the best summer of his life: He'd spent large amounts of time with Sirius, he'd gotten to know his family for the first time ever, he'd learned how to Keep, he'd joined the Order of the Phoenix and helped retrieve the diary, and he'd been at the Burrow when the traitor was revealed to the Order members. And Harry had completed his Animagus training.

"You're ready," Sirius said proudly, after Harry had held his Animagus form for four hours and thirty-nine minutes. Harry had even succeeded in flying around the room several times.

Harry transformed back, and fell back onto the couch, grinning. He loved being in his falcon form. For some reason, his mind felt clearer, and he could see and hear ten times better than usual.

Sirius flopped down into the opposite armchair. "I can't believe you did it in barely two months. That's definitely a record. It took McGonagall at least eight months, and she had spent years reading about it beforehand."

"I had a good teacher," Harry said.

Sirius shook his head. "It certainly wasn't me. There's something different about you, Harry, but I'm not sure what."

"What did Regulus say about the Horcruxes?" Harry asked quickly, changing the subject. They had been venturing too close to dangerous ground for his liking.

"I'm not supposed to say until the Order meeting," Sirius protested, but his eyes were twinkling. "Alright. He said the locket has been completely destroyed, and he's researching the right combination of spells for the diary and ring. Each Horcrux needs an individualistic spell for its obliteration. Fortunately for us, that particular type of dark magic is right up Regulus's alley."

Harry nodded, distracted. Without really thinking about it, he changed his hair colour to red, then to brown, and finally back to black.

"You're really good at that," Sirius remarked. "You're practically a Metamorphagus now." He lapsed into silence.

Preoccupied, Harry glanced out one of the magical windows in the living room. It showed Piccadilly Circus in downtown London. The streets were crowded with commuters, shoppers, and tourists.

Sirius's voice cut into Harry's thoughts. "Are you going to tell me the truth now?"

Harry glanced up quickly, a sinking feeling invading his stomach. "What do you mean?" he said suspiciously.

Sirius's eyes narrowed. "Don't play innocent with me, Harry. It won't work. I know you too well; you're hiding something."

"There's nothing," Harry said curtly. "I just wanted to learn for the fun of it."

"For the fun of it? That's funny, Harry, because a few months ago you would've never taken on such a load of hard Transfiguration simply 'for the fun of it.'"

"I...well..." he stuttered, frantically looking for a plausible answer. Suddenly one came. "I wanted to do *something*," Harry said, trying to sound desperate. "I'm not good at any of my subjects at school. The only thing I can do is fly, but what good will that do? You and Dad, Mum, Moody, McGonagall, the Longbottoms—you're all great Wizards. I wanted to prove that I could do something great too. I read about Animagus transformation last year and thought that maybe if I could achieve it like you and Dad did, maybe you'd stop treating me like I'm ten. Maybe Mum and Dad would quit acting like I can't defend myself, and Moody would stop being surprised every time I learn a spell."

Sirius seemed to accept this answer, though his eyes still held a guarded look. He said nothing for a while, as Harry tried to think of

reasons why he should go home immediately. Unfortunately, he was out of good excuses.

“No one thinks you’re less than you should be, Harry,” Sirius finally said quietly.

Harry laughed harshly. “Really? They had me fooled. They all act like it.” Sirius looked uncomfortable, and when Harry suggested lamely that he should be getting back home, Sirius quickly led the way to the door.

Harry knew his time was running out. Ever since the last Order meeting, he had poured over the book Leila had given him. He had made notes, drawn diagrams, and imagined then dismissed many possible strategies. Now he had scarcely a week left before he was expected back at school. Though he knew he could leave school at will, most likely his absence would be discovered. His chances of rescuing Ginny would be much slimmer if he didn’t carry out his rescue plan this week.

Finally, he decided that he would have to leave that night. He would need several days in Diagon Alley before he actually journeyed north to Azkaban, which was off a remote northern coast of England. First, he’d have to purchase Polyjuice potion. Then he’d look through the magical law records to see how many years Ginny had been given, and what type of prisoner she was classified as. That would give him a good idea of exactly where in Azkaban her cell was located.

Almost reluctantly, Harry packed his trunk, leaving out the few items he’d need for his rescue journey—the Invisibility Cloak, a bag of Galleons, and the Azkaban book for reference. He had decided to Apparate; it was much quicker than flying. It was a good thing James had taken him to the Ministry to get his Apparation License last week.

As the sun set that evening, he composed a letter to his parents explaining that he’d agreed to meet an unspecified girl in Muggle London for a few days prior to the start of school, and they were not to worry about him. He requested that they take his trunk to King’s Cross on the first of September, and said he’d meet them there at that time.

Harry folded up the letter and placed it on his now-clean desk. He knew Lily and James would be upset when they found out he was gone, but there really wasn't much they could do. He was of age. He obviously hadn't been kidnapped—the Anti-Forgery spells that might be cast on his letter would prove that it was really his handwriting—and the Ministry wouldn't waste Aurors to look for a seventeen-year-old Wizard who had left home. After all, he was of age.

He waited restlessly for midnight to come. The numbers on the clock seemed to be slowing to a snail's pace as the moon slowly rose out his window. Finally, at 11:55, he could wait no longer. Quickly casting a Silencing Charm around himself, he took one last look at his room, grabbed small bag he'd packed, and stepped quietly into the hallway. As he passed Leila's room, he felt a stabbing guilt for not saying good-bye. But she'd probably get too worried and emotional. It was better this way. Harry just hoped she didn't kill him when he saw her again. If he saw her again.

He tried not to think about the huge risk he was about to take. The punishment for assisting in the escape of Azkaban prisoners was ten years in solitary confinement, according to the book Leila had given him. The information was just a fast fact, though, the author had written lightly, for no one had ever tried to escape Azkaban before, with or without outside help. *Great*, Harry thought as he tiptoed down the stairway, slipped the Invisibility Cloak on, and quietly pulled the front door open. *I'm about to become the first stupid person ever to attempt an Azkaban escape.*

His thoughts were interrupted when he suddenly tripped over a large object lying on the front step.

Harry caught himself before he fell, but as he stumbled to his feet, he heard a growling noise behind him. He spun around and caught a glimpse of a large black dog snarling at him before the dog disappeared and Sirius appeared in its place.

Harry froze. *He can't see me. I know he can't see me*, he thought wildly, not daring to breathe. But his godfather raised his wand and cried, "Accio Invisibility Cloak!"

The cloak flew off, and Sirius's jaw dropped. "Harry! What are you..."

“Sshhh,” Harry hissed. “You’ll wake my parents!”

Sirius’s face darkened, and he kept his wand up. “You’d better have a good explanation for this. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I can’t tell you,” said Harry, shifting nervously from one foot to another.

His godfather looked him over, and his eyebrows shot up when he saw Harry’s bag. “Planning on being gone for a few days, are you?”

Harry said nothing.

“You should’ve known better than to try getting past me with James’s old cloak. I learned the Accio Invisibility Cloak trick years ago when he’d try to sneak out of our dorm to see Lily at odd hours of the morning.”

Harry started to take a step backwards, but suddenly Sirius’s wand was only inches from his nose again. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what you’re up to,” Sirius growled.

“I can’t say,” Harry said again, exasperated. “You wouldn’t let me do it if you knew,” he added under his breath.

“I’m warning you, my patience is wearing thin,” Sirius cautioned, but Harry only shook his head, his mouth clamped shut.

“Listen, *Harry*,” Sirius said, his voice dangerously calm. “Here are your options. You can tell me where you were going now,” and at this he shook the wand threateningly, “or I can haul you inside and you can explain to your mum and dad and me what you were up too.”

Harry bit his lip, knowing what his choice would be. “Only if you will hear me out, and won’t tell my parents,” he said flatly.

“I swear,” said Sirius, lowering his wand a centimeter. “Do you want to tell me here, or somewhere else?”

“Not here,” Harry replied, shoulders slumping as defeat rolled over him.

“Right then,” Sirius said, tucking his wand back into his pocket. “My place, two cups of tea.”

Harry allowed his godfather to grip his elbow and a second later he felt the now-familiar sensation of apparating. They landed in front of number twelve Grimmauld Place; Sirius quickly unlocked the door and guided Harry through the dark hall into the kitchen. Harry sat down sullenly in a chair, and Sirius took a step back.

“You’re not going to try and escape while I turn my back and make some tea, are you?” Sirius said, eyeing his godson.

Harry shook his head, suddenly feeling very tired. He leaned back in his chair and tried to think of easy ways to tell Sirius the truth. *Um, I’m planning on breaking into Azkaban and rescuing Ginny.* No, too blunt. *I became an Animagus simply because of the guilt I felt when I heard that Ginny was in Azkaban.* That might work, but then Sirius would want to know why his godson felt guilty, and Harry was certainly not going to tell his godfather about the *Aperio*. *The girl I love is in danger.* Too much like a bad soap opera, one of the ones Aunt Petunia liked to watch. *You escaped before, why can’t I?* That wouldn’t work, because Sirius would think he was mad.

“Tea?” said Sirius, breaking into Harry’s reverie. Gratefully, Harry reached for the cup of tea Sirius slid across the table. He took a long warm draught, then set the cup down.

“I’m waiting,” Sirius reminded.

Harry ran one hand through his messy hair. “I don’t really know where to start,” he admitted.

Sirius took a sip of his tea, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “How about the beginning?” he suggested.

“Promise not to interrupt me until I’m done?”

“I’ll swear on one of your mum’s famous curses,” Sirius said, chuckling.

Harry began to talk, pretending to be interested in the contents of his tea cup. "It all started on the first day of summer. Mum and Dad and I were talking about the Order members, and Mum mentioned that Ginny had been sent to Azkaban for opening the Chamber of Secrets."

As he talked, he stirred his tea with a spoon, never looking up. Sirius kept his word, and didn't say a thing. "So I packed my trunk, left a note for my parents, and slipped out of the house under Dad's old cloak," Harry finished. "The rest you know."

Still, Sirius was quiet. Harry forced himself to look up. To his surprise, Sirius did not look angry, or even upset. Surprised, yes. Shocked, maybe. But not mad.

"That's it," Harry said, raising his chin defiantly.

"I can see that you are not going to be persuaded against your rescue mission," Sirius said slowly. "Neither will you listen if I tell you that what you have just proposed is near impossible, not to mention potentially life-threatening. I could physically prevent you from going, but sooner or later you'd escape. I could tell your parents, the Aurors, the Order, and the Dementors, but somehow, I don't think that'd stop you either. Besides, I promised I'd keep this between us, and this Black never goes back on his word. Therefore, there is only one thing left for me to do."

"What's that?" Harry said stiffly.

Sirius finished off the last of his tea, and set the cup on the table with a clunk.

"I can help you."

Chapter 21

At eight-thirty the next morning, James, Lily, and Harry were eating waffles in the kitchen. James folded up his newspaper and slipped his glasses into his pocket. "Honestly," he remarked to Harry, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Sometimes I wonder how your sister ever makes it to classes on time during the school year."

Harry just shrugged. He wondered too. Leila must be a chronic night-owl; he never saw her before at least nine-o'clock each morning.

The doorbell rang, and Sirius appeared, wearing sunglasses and a ridiculous Muggle shirt with a Hawaiian print. "Hi Lily, James. Ready to go, Harry?"

"Go where?" Lily said, lips slightly parted in astonishment.

Sirius feigned surprise. "You don't remember? Harry and I told you months ago that we were going to take a short godfather-godson trip right before school started again."

"What? When?" James asked, looking up from his stack of waffles.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You guys don't remember, do you? I told you on the first day of summer. Sirius is going to take me a bunch of places. Wales, France... Where else, Sirius?"

"The Bahamas," his godfather reminded. "I've got a friend who will lend us her cottage on the sea shore for a couple days."

"It's only for a week," Harry said, turning back to his parents. "I've already packed. You guys said you wouldn't mind taking my trunk to King's Cross for me, and I'll just meet you there on September 1."

Lily shook her head. "I don't remember you saying anything about a trip," she said determinedly.

"You must have forgotten," Sirius said, flashing Lily a charming smile. "Old age does that, you know. I'd recommend a nice Memory Enhancing Potion."

“Awwww, please let me go, Mum,” Harry pleaded. “I’ve been looking forward to this for ages.”

Lily and James looked at each other. “I don’t know...” Lily said, her eyebrows knitting together worriedly.

“Give the kid a break, Lil,” Sirius said. “He’s studied hard at Remedial Transfiguration all summer long. He deserves a little vacation.”

“Fine with me,” James said, shoving the last bite in his mouth and gathering up his plate and silverware.

Lily looked from Harry to James, her lips pressed together. “I guess Harry can go. Sirius, you’d better take care of him, though! If you don’t bring him back in one piece...” She left her threat unfinished, and for the first time, Harry thought he saw a flicker of fear in his godfather’s eyes.

“Don’t worry, Lily,” Sirius said chastely. “He’ll be safe with me.”

Harry smiled wryly, and excused himself to go upstairs and grab his bag. Sirius hadn’t been lying, really. The dangerous part of the plan would begin when they had to split paths.

When he pushed open his door, he found a sleepy-looking Leila still in her dressing gown standing by his desk. As he entered, she spun around, eyes flashing.

“Care to explain *this*?” she spat, waving the letter in his face.

“Just a first draft,” Harry said quickly, shrinking back towards the door. “I wasn’t going to leave without saying goodbye to you, honest!” He crossed his fingers behind his back.

She eyed him suspiciously. “So when *are* you going to leave?”

“I’m leaving now,” he told her quietly.

Leila’s eyes widened, and a moment later she had thrown her arms around Harry. He staggered back a few steps, and awkwardly patted her on the back.

“Be careful,” she said, her voice muffled in his chest. “Oh Harry...”

She finally released him, and stepped back. “Don’t worry,” Harry said, trying to comfort her. “Sirius is going too. He’s going to help. But I don’t have time to explain now.”

Leila bit her lip, and with a sinking feeling Harry noticed tears forming in her eyes. “I’ll see you soon,” she said, as if trying to convince herself of the fact. “Don’t you dare get yourself stuck in Azkaban, or I might be forced to come rescue you myself.”

Harry laughed with her, but part of him knew she was deadly serious. “Save me a seat in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express.”

“I will,” she promised. “If you don’t come next Monday, I swear I’ll be reacquainting you with some of my more creative curses when you do show up at school.”

Harry winced. “I’ll do my best,” he said.

Leila looked away, and Harry fervently hoped she wasn’t going to start sobbing. “I found the photo album,” she said suddenly. “I’ll pack it with my stuff and give it to you when we get to school.”

“Thanks, Leila. Listen, if I don’t come back...” Harry’s voice trailed off.

“You will,” she whispered fiercely.

“But if I don’t... The risk we’re taking...”

“I know the risks,” she said flatly. “I read the whole Azkaban book before I gave it to you. I know you’ll get ten years if you’re caught.”

Harry swallowed hard. “I just want you to know you’re the best sister a bloke could ask for.”

She gazed up at him, teary eyed, but her lips curved into a small smile. “I’m the only sister you ever had, prat,” she said. “Go, before Sirius comes looking for you.”

With one last look at his sister, Harry picked up his bag and scurried out the door. In the living room, Sirius was chatting with James and Lily.

"Why weren't you here at three this morning?" James was asking .

Sirius threw a quick glance at Harry, who had just entered the room. "I was occupied," he said smoothly. "I forgot all about our plans."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Meaning you had too much to drink and forgot all about your little meeting with James."

"Actually, I'll have you know I took a girl out to dinner last night," Sirius said loftily. "A pretty one, too."

James snorted. "They're all pretty, Sirius. And brainless, and empty. You need to learn from me, mate." He gave Lily a wink.

"Harry," Sirius said quickly, acknowledging his presence. "Shall we get started?"

Harry nodded, and took a long look at his parents before following his godfather out. It might very well be the last time he ever saw them.

Several hours later found Harry and Sirius walking down the main street of Diagon Alley. Harry was breathing hard, lugging a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion. "Wait up," he panted. Sirius, who was several strides ahead, stopped and waited.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said, halting to catch his breath.

Sirius immediately saw the problem. He whipped out his wand and cast a Feather-Light Charm over the cauldron. Instantly the dead weight vanished.

"Thanks," said Harry, as Sirius began to walk again. "So what were you doing on my doorstep last night?"

"I would have thought that to be obvious," Sirius said. "James and I had to meet at three to carry out some plans for the Order, but I knew I'd never be able to wake up and apparate over here at that unearthly hour of the morning. I came as Padfoot and curled up on the doorstep to sleep. Lucky for you that I did, too."

Harry did not acknowledge this fact, but in reality he felt much better knowing Sirius was going to help him. They had spent an hour at Sirius's apartment the previous night drawing up a strategy. Harry hated to admit it, but without Sirius, he would have never been able to rescue Ginny. It was a two-person job. When they had finished with their planning, Harry knew their scheme was good. Very good. It might actually work. "So where are we heading next?" he asked.

"Ravenclaw Archives," Sirius replied. Harry easily matched his long strides. "It's the wizarding library in London, founded by Ravenclaw soon after Hogwarts was established. I'll get you started with the old court records, then I've got to pay a little visit with a old acquaintance in the Auror office."

Harry followed Sirius up a long set of stairs rising to a magnificent white marble building supported by a row of columns. Inside, Sirius chatted comfortable with a pretty blonde witch behind the information desk. She introduced herself as Debbie. "I'd be glad to assist your godson here," she said after Sirius told her what they needed. "Right this way."

Harry climbed three staircases and walked past more books than he'd ever imagined existed. "Hermione could live here," he said under his breath as they started up the fourth staircases.

"What was that?" Sirius called over his shoulder.

"Nothing," Harry mumbled.

Sirius looked as if he would have inquired further, but at that moment, Debbie made a sharp right. "Here we are," she chirped, leading the way into a large room. The walls were hidden by rows of file cabinets that reached to the ceiling. In the middle of the room was a long mahogany table surrounded by business-like chairs.

“Make yourself comfortable,” the girl invited. “Which records are you looking for?”

“The particular case we’re searching for is a murder charge that took place in late 1992 or 1993,” Sirius said, and with a flick of Debbie’s wand, twenty thick files soared out of various cabinets and skidded down the table, landing in a messy stack in front of Harry.

“These are the serious crime files from the years you mentioned,” Debbie explained. “They are in order by date.” She paused uncertainly. “Will you be OK?”

Sirius flashed her a charming smile. “Of course. Thank you for your help.”

“Well, then, I’ll just go back to the front, but I’ll pop in later to see if you need further assistance.”

Once she had left, Sirius stood. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours, hopefully sooner. It will depend on how much *persuasion* is needed.” Harry opened his mouth to ask what Sirius was talking about, but Sirius cut him off. “Not now...I’ll fill you in later. Good luck with the records!”

Harry watched him leave, then dove into the files. He started in September of 1992, remembering that it was unlikely he’d find the case so early in the records. But since he remembered the first Basilisk attack happening in September, he figured it would be the logical place to start.

After an hour and a half, Harry had only reached February 1993. Most of the cases were pretty boring—embezzlement, robbery, or assault charges. Harry recognized Mundungus Fletcher’s name on several of the reports, but at closer inspection, the shady wizard had always been able to talk his way out of a sentence. The majority of the murder charges were for Death Eaters, but there were some civilian cases too.

Debbie came in once, but Harry waved her away, maintaining that he was doing fine by himself. He could tell she was curious about who’s case he was looking for, but she was too polite to ask.

By the time he reached March, he was fed up with how slow things were going. He pulled out his wand and murmured a simple alphabetizing charm. The papers flew around and when they settled, the records were in order by the last name of the accused party. *Much better*, Harry thought as he flipped to the W's. There were no files for a Weasley, Ginevra. Sighing, he flicked his wand and resorted the papers before moving on.

In April's folder, he found it.

Ginevra Weasley, the file read, Age twelve. Case number 22106. Accused, tried, and convicted on the thirteenth of April for opening the alleged Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, resulting in the deaths of four students: Ms. Padma Patil, Ms. Patricia Stimpson, Mr. Anthony Goldstein, and Ms. Alicia Spinnet. Harry felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. Four of his schoolmates, dead. He forced himself to read on. Verdict: Guilty as charged. Sentence: Fifteen years in the Wizarding Prison Azkaban. To be kept isolated because of the nature of the charges. Harry smiled grimly. Perfect. A rescue would be much harder if there were any witnesses—other inmates.

He quickly scanned through the rest of the file. Sure enough, Malfoy had caught her speaking Parseltongue and opening the Chamber. He had straightaway informed his father, who had sent a whole squadron of Aurors to whisk away the dazed first year. Things had moved very quickly from there. Under Veritiserum, Ginny had admitted to opening the Chamber and releasing the monster, but she had gone on and on about a diary and a dark-haired boy named Tom. Since there was no one at school by the name of Tom, the examiners had passed him off as a hallucination that had become truth in her mind. The defense had insisted that further inquiries be made about the diary. Aurors reluctantly searched the school, but found nothing. The vote by the Wizengamot had been nearly unanimous. The verdict? Guilty. The recorder dually noted that the one person to vote "Not Guilty," Ameila Bones, had died in a Death Eater attack only a few days later. Harry was sure it wasn't a coincidence.

On the second-to-last page, he found an interesting tidbit. McGonagall hadn't been the Headmistress at the time of the trial.

Another woman had been head of the school, Julietta Meriden. After the deaths, she had been voted out of position by angry parents, and counsel members. Despite the push for Dolores Umbridge to become Headmistress, the counsel had decided on Minerva McGonagall instead.

Harry quickly flipped the last page and scanned the list of trial attendees. To his outrage, not a single Order member had attended the trial. Harry guessed that they hadn't been allowed in. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had been there. He choked down the urge to vomit as he began to understand a bit of what Ginny had gone through. She had sat in that horrible chair, all alone, with the chains encircling her tiny wrists, in front of the entire Wizengamot. Not a single familiar face had been there to comfort her.

The writer stated also that the location of the entrance to the Chamber was a fact still to be disclosed. The head of the Wizengamot didn't want the location to be widely known. Well, that explained why McGonagall hadn't known where the entrance was. She hadn't been allowed to attend the trial, nor would she have heard from Draco Malfoy, since he went first to his father instead of a professor or the Headmistress.

Harry sighed, and leaned back in his chair. The whole trial had been a scam. He tried not to think of Ginny, all alone at the trial, probably thinking that even her family had deserted her for what she had done. And to think that this would've never happened if he and Lupin hadn't changed the realities. If the Aperio had never taken place, Ginny would be at the Burrow right now, happy and healthy with her friends and family around her. *Stop that,* Harry told himself sternly. *It's not your fault that Ginny's in Azkaban.* Then why did he feel so guilty?

"Find anything?" a voice said.

Harry jumped at the sound, and whirled around to see Sirius standing there, clutching a leather packet in his hands. Harry silently handed over the case report.

"Excellent," Sirius said, quickly scanning the first page. "She'll have a cell to herself." He kept reading, a scowl forming on his face. When he read the last page, he let loose a string of profanities Harry was

sure his godfather would've never used had Lily been present. "Damn them all," Sirius finished, pounding the table with his fist. "Of all the low, slimy, treacherous things to do..."

"Do you think the Ministry kept the Order members from attending the trial on purpose?" Harry asked.

Sirius nodded grimly. "It's just the kind of trick Lucius Malfoy would pull." He pulled out his wand and muttered the duplication spell. Tucking the copies into his pocket, he shoved the stack of papers back into the file and unceremoniously threw the folder back into the stack. Then he turned to Harry. "I'd say some lunch at the Leaky Cauldron is in order."

Chapter 22

“What are you looking so smug about?” Harry asked a half hour later, exasperated. He took a sip of his Butterbeer and looked expectantly at his godfather, who had been periodically smiling for no reason at all throughout the meal.

“Nothing really important,” Sirius said evasively, but Harry persisted until Sirius finally gave in. “Alright, I’ll tell you. See this?” Harry’s godfather waved the leather packet in front of Harry’s face.

“Yeah?”

“Look inside.”

Harry looked, and found several very official-looking documents. “But... These are visitation rights!”

Sirius grinned. “Bingo.”

“Where did you get these? And why does one say Jean-Claude Benoit on it?”

“One question at a time,” Sirius said, taking a swig of his Firewhisky. “I told you I visited a friend in the Auror department, didn’t I?” Harry nodded, and Sirius looked around cautiously to make sure they weren’t being overheard before continuing. “My friend’s name is Hugh Pullman—yes, the brother of Elijah Pullman, the famous Keeper—and he’s an Auror. Aurors have permission to give out visiting rights for prisoners in Azkaban. Without a permit, it is possible to visit prisoners, but much depends upon their status. A few years ago I caught Hugh making illegal bets on the outcome of the Chudley Cannons verses the Tutshill Tornados, and then sabotaging the Tornados so the Cannons would win. I should have turned him in as a Ministry official, but I didn’t. Instead I let it pass, knowing that the day might come when I needed something from him. So I visited him this morning, and told him what I knew and what evidence I had, and for my silence, he somewhat reluctantly gave me this.”

“Cool,” Harry said, glancing over the documents. “But why is one for Jean-Claude Benoit?”

“That’s your alias. As soon as Ginny is discovered missing, they’ll come after me. I don’t care if they question me. They won’t be able to find my house, and they’ll have no proof that I had anything to do with Ginny’s escape. But I’d rather not put you and your family in that situation, so you’ll pretend to be a very distant cousin visiting from France. The Ministry isn’t allowed to track down people from other countries unless they are currently residing in Great Britain. So technically, you’ll be safe.”

“But what about you? Won’t they ask questions about your cousin and inquire further?”

“Maybe,” Sirius said, leaning back in his chair and fishing around in his pocket for a galleon and a few knuts to pay for the meal. “But I doubt it. The Black family is very extensive. It’s well known that some of my relatives came from France hundreds of years, and others from Romania as well. I’ve got so many distant relatives not listed on the Family Tapestry that any well-educated Ministry official knows it’d be impossible to track down a distant cousin.”

“What if they submit you Veritiserum?”

“They won’t,” Sirius said confidently. “I’ve worked for the Ministry, and I know how they think. Our plan is foolproof.”

Harry wished he felt as confident as his godfather sounded.

They floored to a Wizarding pub called the Deadly Dagger. It was north of Aberdeen, Scotland, and at first appearance, Harry decided he’d finally found a pub with a larger cast of shady characters than the Hog’s Head. Sirius rushed Harry out the door, and they crossed the street to a shabby-looking hotel—Berja’s Bed and Breakfast.

Sirius reserved two rooms, and paid in advance for dinner. They spent the rest of the afternoon perfecting the plan, Sirius drilling the details into Harry’s head. By the time dinner was over, Harry was exhausted, having spent most of the previous night awake. “I think I’ll turn in,” Harry said, yawning over the last few bites of pudding.

“Get your sleep,” Sirius instructed. “Merlin knows you’ll need it.”

But Harry couldn’t sleep. He tossed and turned on the scratchy mattress all night long, his mind filled with images of Ginny, Dementors, and the green flash of the Avada Kedavra curse. Obviously, Sirius was having no such problems, because Harry could hear snores through the thin walls. He finally groped around for his wand and cast a sloppy Silencing Charm, but it didn’t work. When he did fall asleep, he dreamed of tall black walls, shackles, and iron bars. He was stuck in Azkaban for years...for eternity...with no possible chance of escape. But that wasn’t the worst part. In his dream, Ginny was there too. He’d failed to rescue her.

“Harry. Get up.” Someone was shaking him.

“What time is it?” Harry mumbled, rubbing his eyes sleepily and stretching.

“Seven,” Sirius said over his shoulder, heading back toward the door. “The boat to Azkaban leaves at eight, so you’d better get ready.”

Harry got dressed quickly, throwing a large loose black robe over his pants and shirt. He filled his pockets with the small vials of Polyjuice Potion they had packaged the night before, and grabbed his wand before descending the stairs into the diner below. When he got there, Sirius was still polishing off a plate of bacon and eggs.

“Want some?” he asked, his mouth full.

Harry shook his head. He was sure his stomach wouldn’t allow it.

“You’ve got to eat something,” Sirius said after swallowing. He ran a hand through his shoulder-length black hair. “You’ll need your strength,” he added in a lower voice.

“I don’t think...I can’t...”

“Just a little something,” Sirius said sternly. “Think you can manage a glass of pumpkin juice?”

"I guess," Harry muttered, and sat down heavily in the chair as Sirius went over to the bar and returned with a brimming goblet.

"Drink it quickly," he commanded, nervously looking at the clock on the wall. "We don't have much time."

The air was strangely cold as Harry followed Sirius down the deserted Muggle road. There was no sign of the rising sun. The sky was dark and cloudy, and a stiff breeze was blowing a freezing mist around.

"Here we are," Sirius said, making a left. Harry could see a severe grey stone building built right on the rocky beach. He heard the roar of the waves crashing on the shoreline beyond the building, but the sea was hidden by the fog.

"Where are we?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"The clearing house for Azkaban prisoners," Sirius said grimly. "The last place some of them ever see before they're sent to the prison for life."

They approached the building tentatively. Sirius paused before the grim door. "Harry, are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this?" Harry opened his mouth to answer, but Sirius raised a hand. "Wait. Think about it. Are you sure you want to take this risk?"

"Yes," Harry said immediately.

"You're positive?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"I asked you why. Why are you doing this?"

That one was easy. "I don't think I could live with myself if I didn't try. She's innocent, Sirius. We both know that. If I don't do something, who will? No one."

His godfather smiled sadly. "You're just like your mum and dad. They always fought for what was right no matter what other people said. No turning back, then."

"No turning back," Harry repeated firmly, and Sirius pushed open the door. Harry followed him into a dark room with grey walls. On the far wall were several cells surrounded by prison bars. A short round man wearing spectacles was hidden behind a desk piled high with papers. Sirius cleared his throat, and the man looked up.

"Yes?" he barked. "What do you want?"

"We've got permits to visit a prisoner at Azkaban."

The man silently held out a pudgy hand and Sirius passed the official papers over. The man's eyes widened in surprise. "These are for Ginny Weasley."

"Yes? What of it?" Sirius said shortly.

"She's hardly ever allowed visitors. You must know someone in high places to acquire these. Even her parents aren't allowed to see her."

Harry bit back a few choice swear words, remembering that he wasn't even supposed to understand English. Sirius looked like he might explode, but he instead took a deep breath and said, "Well, they're authentic, I promise you."

"I don't doubt they are," the little man muttered. "Two visitors, then. You... and who is this?"

"My nephew, Jean-Claude, visiting from France," Sirius said.

The little man scrutinized Harry from over the top of his glasses. "A bit skinny, isn't he? Not of age yet, huh?"

"No."

“Did he bring his wand?”

Sirius turned to Harry and rattled off a long string of French-sounding words. Fighting the urge to grin, Harry gave a tiny nod.

“Hand your wands over, then,” the man barked.

Harry waited until Sirius had pulled out his wand before retrieving his own and placing it in the outstretched pudgy hand. He felt a sense of loss, though he knew he’d get it back...eventually. His wand had become part of him.

“Right this way,” the man said, rising from the overstuffed chair and waddling down the hallway. They followed him through the building and through the back door onto the beach. “Your boat is there,” the man directed, pointing to a medium-sized boat on the shore. “Usually the Dementors would want to accompany the boat, but since you’re visitors, there will be no need.”

Harry gingerly climbed into the pinnace and seated himself on one of the benches. He figured that the boat could probably hold about twelve passengers if full. Once Sirius was in, the boat began moving by itself. Out, through the surf, and into the open sea.

He shivered as the wind whipped the icy water into the boat. Once or twice the sun broke through the gray clouds, only to be hidden again a few moments later. The waves seemed to be getting larger. Harry gripped the side of the boat and at a particularly jerky swell, he promptly emptied the contents of his stomach into the water.

Sirius, rather than being sympathetic, was pleased. “Good, good. You’ve got to look as weak as you can going out so we’ll be able to fool them on the way out.”

“That’s alright for you to say,” Harry grumbled, wiping his mouth and holding his nauseated stomach.

The ride seemed to last forever. Harry knew they were getting close the prison long before the grey outline of Azkaban appeared on the horizon because of the cold chill in his chest that had nothing to do with the weather. He squinted, and in the distance, he could barely

make out black specks hovering in the sky. "Dementors," Sirius acknowledged.

As they got closer, the coldness increased. The screaming hadn't begun yet, but he knew it would. He swayed a little in his seat.

Sirius looked over at him worriedly. "Are you OK?"

"Just the Dementors," Harry mumbled.

Sirius dug into his pockets. "Here," he said, handing Harry something brown. "Long-lasting chocolate candy. Stick it in your mouth and it will dissolve slowly. It will help."

It did help. The coldness lessened, and the screaming did not start in Harry's ears. The boat was drawing nearer to the prison now, and Harry could see a huge stone fortress rising impressively from the water. The enormous waves were slapping against the walls, the spray flying at least twenty feet into the air. The building was so tall that the top was obscured by the mist; so wide, that Harry was sure it must be several miles in width. On one corner of the fortress, Harry could see a small black dock. The boat seemed to be making for this entrance, and a few minutes later it had pulled up next to the pier.

"Come on," Sirius said, and held out his hand to help Harry out of the boat. Harry was feeling incredibly dizzy; the ground seemed to be moving up and down.

"The feeling will leave in a little bit," Sirius said, reading his mind. He supported Harry as they slowly climbed the narrow stone steps to the archway guarded by two Dementors. Harry felt his eyes rolling back in his head as they neared the tall, black-robed beings. He chewed on his chocolate quickly and felt a little better, but he could now hear his mother's frantic screams.

"All right there, Harry?" Sirius said softly once they had passed the Dementors.

"Yeah," Harry replied, straightening. Block the Dementors from his mind. Yeah, that was the trick. He focused on the happiest memories

he could muster, and chewed on the chocolate once again. "I'm fine," he said, impatiently. "Let's go."

They made their way down a dark hall. Harry shivered as water dripped from the slime-covered ceiling. Even though they were out of the wind, a cool draft was blowing through the passageway. Soon the narrow hall turned into a courtyard, lighted by dim candles on old iron holders around the walls. A big, burly man was standing there, waiting. With a shock, Harry recognized Walden McNair, a Death Eater who had for years served as executioner for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The last time Harry had seen him was at the Ministry, the night Sirius had died.

"You're here to visit Ginny Weasley," McNair growled. "Humphrey owed me and told me you were coming. Right this way."

Sirius and Harry followed the man down numerous corridors and up a labyrinth of staircases. "Act like you're getting weaker," Sirius hissed in Harry's ear. It was part of the plan.

Harry nodded slightly to show he'd heard. It wasn't hard to pretend. The corridors were guarded by Dementors at every turn, and every time they passed one, Harry felt his knees weakening as the screaming filled his head. Finally, his knees buckled on the twentieth staircase, and Sirius had to grab his arm to keep him from falling.

McNair looked back. "What's the matter with your cousin?" he said sharply.

"He's never been around a Dementor before," Sirius said quickly. "He's having a bad reaction, that's all. He'll be fine."

McNair grunted and continued on up the stairs. Sirius supported Harry, who was still finding it hard to walk. He tried to memorise each turn they took, but it was hard as his eyes kept trying to roll back into his head. The screaming was relentless. *Block it out*, he told himself. *Think of Ron and Hermione. Think about Leila, and Mum and Dad. Anything happy.*

Now they were passing cells with prisoners in them. Harry couldn't really see into the cells, as each cell was closed in by a huge steel

door with one tiny barred window near the top. The stench of urine and feces was overpowering; Harry choked, and even Sirius seemed to be trying not to breathe.

“Here we are,” the Death Eater grunted, stopping by one of the cell doors. He pulled from his pocket a large ring of severe-looking keys and fitted one into the massive bolt lock. With a couple jerks, the lock turned, and the cell door swung open.

Chapter 23

Harry felt his heart beating wildly in his chest as the huge door slowly swung open. He and Sirius stepped into the cell.

"You have fifteen minutes," McNair said, and with a bang, the door shut behind them.

Harry looked around. The cell was small—no bigger than ten square feet. Over in a corner was a small spigot from which water was dripping slowly. The floor was covered in dirt and human waste. A pile of rags lay in the other corner. But upon closer examination, the pile of rags wasn't a pile of rags. It was Ginny.

She was curled up in a little ball, her face covered in dirt and grime. Her hair wasn't red anymore—it was a grayish-brown, probably again from the filth. Eyes closed, she appeared to be asleep, or else not conscious. Her frame was painfully thin—she looked even smaller than she'd been when Harry had first met her at King's Cross his first year at Hogwarts.

"Ginny," Harry breathed, frozen in shock.

Sirius strode over to her, pulling from beneath his robes a small vial filled with clear lavender liquid. "Strengthening Solution," he murmured to Harry. "Don't just stand there, boy, get over here and help me!"

Harry finally found his ability to walk again, and dashed the few paces. Sirius was already gently shaking Ginny's frail shoulders. Harry crouched on her other side and watched.

She didn't stir. "Ginny," Sirius called. "Ginny!" Still no movement. He tried slapping her cheeks, and finally her eyelids flickered.

"Help me, Harry," Sirius commanded, and together they pulled Ginny up into a sitting situation. Her robes were in rags and her head sagged against her chest.

Sirius lifted her chin, but she didn't seem to recognize either of them. Her grey eyes were blank and unfocused. The eyelids fluttered closed. "Oh, no you don't," Sirius muttered, slapping her cheeks again until her eyes opened again. "Can you drink something?"

There was no response. "I don't think she knows who we are," Harry whispered hoarsely.

"Tilt her head up," Sirius said, biting his lip in concentration. He uncorked the vial, gently pried her mouth open, and tipped a few drops onto her tongue. After a few moments her throat moved as she swallowed.

"Excellent," Sirius said, half to himself, as he tipped a few more drops into her mouth. Once the bottle was empty, he sat back on his heels. "Now, we wait."

Ginny's head fell back onto her chest, but a few seconds later her body began shaking violently. A low moan came from deep within her throat, and suddenly her head jerked up. Her eyes became wide and alert. She glanced at Harry, then at Sirius, and began to scream.

Sirius slapped his hand over her mouth. "Be quiet! We're here to help you," he hissed.

She stopped screaming, and slowly drew her legs up to her chest. Her wide, brown eyes were darting back and forth fearfully.

"You won't scream again if I take my hand off your mouth, will you?" Sirius asked her gently, and she shook her head slightly.

Sirius removed his hand. "We're here to get you out of here, but you have to do exactly what we say. Do you understand?"

Ginny nodded, her eyes following Sirius as he reached inside his robes again and brought out a piece of chocolate. "Eat this," he commanded. "You'll feel better."

She did, taking tiny bites. When she finished, she looked a little better. "Who are you?" she whimpered.

“Sirius Black, and this is my godson Harry,” Sirius said. “We aren’t going to hurt you. Now listen carefully, OK?”

“OK,” she murmured, staring up at him.

Sirius extracted yet another bottle. “This is Polyjuice Potion. We’re going to give you some and it will make you look like Harry. Then you and I can leave. Do you think you can walk?”

“I’ll try,” Ginny whispered.

“I’m going to help you back to the boat, and then back to my place.”

“Harry Potter,” Ginny said softly, now looking over at Harry. “You...you were at school. At Hogwarts.” Suddenly her eyes widened and she gave a soft scream. “I didn’t do it! I didn’t mean to! It was Tom... He made me...” She broke into terrified sobs.

Harry patted her awkwardly on the back. “Shhhh. We know you didn’t mean to. We know about Tom.”

“You know about Tom?” she choked. “But they didn’t believe me. No one believed me...not even Mum and Dad...”

“We believe you,” said Sirius firmly. “We don’t have much time. Do you think you can drink this?”

She nodded, and Harry quickly ripped out a few hairs and plunged them into the bottle. Sirius helped her stand, and Harry unbuttoned his outer robe. He and Sirius threw it over her shoulders and buttoned the front, completely obscuring her ragged clothing beneath. Sirius pulled out a pocket knife and cut a good chunk out of her hair, handing it over to Harry.

Sirius then passed the vial to Ginny, and supported her while she drained it. A few seconds later, she had turned into an exact copy of Harry. Only much weaker. She slumped into Sirius’s arms.

“Quick,” Sirius instructed. “Another Strengthening Solution.”

Harry found one in his pocket and tilted Ginny's chin up as he slowly poured the lavender liquid down her throat. She coughed, then revived. "Did it work?" she murmured, looking up. "I can't see very well."

Sirius chuckled. "It worked all right. Here." He handed her an exact copy of Harry's glasses, and she pushed them on.

"Now for you," Sirius said to Harry, and he pulled out another vial of Polyjuice.

Harry placed one of Ginny's hairs into the vial, and watched it turn orange. "Here goes nothing," he said nervously, and drained the potion. It began to work almost immediately. He felt himself shrinking. When he opened his eyes again, he was considerably smaller. And weaker. *Merlin, how did Ginny ever survive this long?* Harry thought as he examined his tiny arms and hands.

Sirius threw him a garment, which Harry slipped over his head. It was a small robe, but now it fit him loosely. The black robe was dirty and ripped, but it would suffice to hide Harry's other clothes from view.

"Give her your shoes," Sirius commanded. "And take off your glasses."

That was why he couldn't see. Harry kicked off his shoes and removed the glasses. Instantly everything became clearer.

Sirius looked him over. "Still too clean," he muttered, and produced another potion, which he unceremoniously dumped over Harry's head. Harry could feel the potion working. Dirt and grime immediately appeared on his hands, arms, and face. His hair was now matted and dirty.

"Perfect," Sirius said approvingly. He handed Harry a box. "This contains twenty-five vials of Polyjuice. That, and the vials in your pockets should last you at least three days. The box has been charmed so only you can see it. Take Polyjuice only during the day when McNair and the other people who work here are patrolling the halls. At night, the Dementors will be patrolling, and they are blind."

Harry nodded. It took effort.

“If you don’t show up in three days exactly at the meeting place, I’ll wait twenty-four more hours, then I’m coming in after you.”

Ginny-looking-like-Harry was slumped against the wall again, but at least she was alert. Sirius offered her an arm and she leaned on him gratefully. He handed her a piece of chocolate to suck on.

“I hear McNair coming,” Sirius said, glancing towards the door. “Harry, be careful.”

“I will,” Harry replied. “Take care of her.”

“I will.”

There was the sound of the key in the lock, and as the door swung open, Harry quickly scooted back into the corner and tried to look blank and unresponsive.

McNair was there. “Time’s up,” he said stiffly.

Sirius nodded and without a backward glance, he helped Ginny out the door.

“He’s really taking Dementors badly, isn’t he?” McNair commented, eyes narrowed.

Harry didn’t hear Sirius’s reply. The cell door had swung shut with a resounding clang.

Harry Potter was imprisoned in Azkaban.

Author’s Note: So, that’s it. How did you like it? No, Ginny is not the third person in the Aperio. ducks from all the rotten eggs and tomatos being thrown Sorry! Though I would have thought that to be obvious early on—the third person must be someone who *knew Lily and James* or was connected to them in some way (like Harry). Many of you have come very close to the correct guess.

Were you hoping for a scene like this?

Harry felt his heart beating wildly in his chest as the huge door slowly swung open. He and Sirius stepped into the cell. Suddenly something had crashed into his face. He stumbled back, reeling. Slowly his vision cleared.

"Ginny? Bloody hell, what was that for?" Harry exclaimed, fingering the spot where she'd hit his face.

"For leaving me in here for two sodding months, you bastard! Why didn't you come sooner? What's happened? Why am I here?" Ginny exclaimed, her face furious. "Holy mother of Merlin..." She trailed off when she was who Harry had brought with him. "Is that... Sirius?"

That was fun to write. Maybe I'll do an Alternate Ending to this story in which Ginny's the third person in the Aperio... and AU of an AU. Weird.

Chapter 24

The first day in Azkaban was the longest day of Harry's life. Immediately after Sirius and Ginny left, a cold descended over the cell. The Dementors' effects were slowly coming back, no matter how hard Harry tried to block them from his mind. His father's shouts and mother's screams became louder and louder every time a Dementor passed the cell.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off—"

Evil laughter. "Avada Kedavra!"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room—a door bursting open—

"Not Harry! Not Harry! Please—I'll do anything—"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"No! Not Harry! I won't let you!"

A cackle of high-pitched laughter, and Voldemort's voice once again saying the killing curse...

When a Dementor came near, he was also forced to relive other terrible memories from his life: Hermione screaming as the troll hovered over her, club raised. Ron lying pale and still after the enchanted chess game. Dudley and his gang making fun of Harry. Sirius falling through the veil. Being banned from Quidditch by Umbridge. Uncle Vernon, red-faced, yelling about something Harry had or hadn't done.

Harry desperately fought to stay afloat in the sea of bad experiences. Something caught his attention—he was growing, changing back. Desperately he groped around for another vial of Polyjuice and crammed a piece of Ginny's hair in it. It felt good to concentrate on something tangible. Quickly he drained the vial and felt himself shrinking again. Just in time, too, because footsteps were echoing in

the hallway. A moment later, McNair passed the door, and the footsteps retreated.

Harry shoved the empty bottle back into the small box. Had it only been an hour? It'd felt like a whole day had passed since Sirius had stepped through the cell door. Harry wondered if Sirius and Ginny had reached safety yet. If they'd been discovered before leaving Azkaban, surely Ginny would have been dragged back by now.

With a cold sensation in his stomach, Harry realized that the Dementor was returning.

Aunt Marge was insulting his dead parents. A high, cold voice was saying, "Kill the spare." Cedric was lying lifeless on the ground. Voldemort was rising out of the cauldron. Uncle Vernon was shoving Harry into the cupboard for something he hadn't done. Hermione was lying petrified in the hospital bed.

And so it went. Every hour Harry was jerked out of his nightmares by the ending effects of Polyjuice. Every hour he would take more Polyjuice before the Dementor returned and he sank back into reliving the never-ending line of the worst memories of his life. And every hour he wondered how anyone could survive a week, much less ten years of this. No wonder most people came out of Azkaban barking mad.

Ginny was lying in front of the statue of Slytherin as Riddle called forth the Basilisk. A herd of Acromantulas were closing in around Ron and Harry. Dumbledore was drinking the horrible potion. The Inferi were hauling Harry down into the black freezing lake. A hundred Dementors were closing in around Harry and Hermione as Sirius lay bleeding on the ground. Snape was yelling "Avada Kedavra." Dumbledore was tumbling like a rag doll over the battlements. The Basilisk poison was seeping into his veins... He was dying...

The next time the Polyjuice wore off, Harry noticed that the cell was darker than it had been. This puzzled him, because the two dim candles were still burning. Looking up, Harry found the other source of light.

Twenty feet up the back wall was a small window. Only two bars covered it, and as far as Harry could judge, the gaps were about six inches wide. It wasn't much, but it was definitely worth a try. It'd be much easier to slip out if he could slip out the bars in his Animagus form rather than out the cell door when McNair or a Dementor brought him food. Harry felt his heart leap.

Soon after, night fell and a cold draft extinguished the candles, leaving Harry in darkness. He allowed the Polyjuice to wear off and once he was himself again, he curled up in a ball and tried to sleep.

But sleep seemed impossible. Dementors patrolled the corridors, and every one time came near, Harry plunged once again into the worst recollections of his seventeen years. When he was conscious again, he could hear the screams and moans of other prisoners, probably each living in their own nightmares.

How did Sirius survive this for twelve years? Then Harry remembered. He smacked himself on the forehead. How could he have forgotten? Sirius's words came back to him: *"So when it all became too much, I could transform in my cell...become a dog."* That was the key—Animagus transformation!

Harry took a few deep breaths and concentrated on transforming. When he opened his eyes, though, to his horror he was still himself. Panic welled up. Had he forgotten how to do it? Maybe Azkaban had anti-Animagus wards around it. He would be stuck here forever—trapped in living hell.

You're being irrational, a little voice in his head said reasonably. *Sirius did it; you can too. Relax and try again.* Slowly, Harry relaxed. He closed his eyes and thought through the transformation slowly and carefully, then concentrated his entire being on transforming. When he opened his eyes, he knew it had worked. His mind was suddenly clearer, and he could think rationally. He also found that his falcon eyes could easily penetrate the darkness. It was a far cry better than his previous state

Wearily Harry closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep.

The next day was much better. Harry found that even under Polyjuice, he could easily perform an Animagus transformation, so he took to becoming a falcon whenever the human guards weren't around. The Dementor effects were greatly diminished when he had transfigured, and by the time night fell, Harry felt much more optimistic. Only one more day to go before he could escape. He and Sirius had decided that a three-day period would be safe enough. They'd be able to argue to the Ministry that they had nothing to do with Ginny's escape. But Harry was becoming weaker. He hadn't touched the prison rations that the Dementors had brought him once a day. The slop was hardly food, so Harry had ignored it.

But when he woke the third day, he knew he would have to eat something soon. A dizziness that had nothing to do with the Dementors was overcoming him. When food came, Harry choked down a few bites before shoving the rest away. He wasn't *that* hungry.

All day long, he rationed the remaining Polyjuice Potion, knowing that if for some reason he couldn't manage to escape, he'd need the extra potion for one more day.

As the third night fell, Harry felt giddy, both from nerves and his almost-empty stomach. But as soon as it was dark, the halls became alive with both Dementors and people. Guards were yelling things back and forth, and through the barred window in the door, Harry could see prisoners being dragged past, their hands and feet in shackles. All night long he looked for an opportune moment to slip away, but McNair kept coming around to check on the prisoners. No window of opportunity came. With the rising sun, Harry drained the last of his Polyjuice potion. What was he to do now?

The last hour of Polyjuice ticked slowly by. Harry fought desperately to throw off the Dementors' effects and think rationally, but it wasn't until the Polyjuice was wearing off that an idea struck him. It was something Sirius had said at their last Animagus lesson... "You're practically a Metamorphagus." That was it! With the last of his strength, Harry shrunk his bones and grew himself a lot of dirty red hair. If he kept his face hidden, hopefully no one would notice.

The fourth day in Azkaban was torture. The corridors were still overrun by Dementors, prisoners, and guards. When the Dementors were around, Harry fell back into the now-familiar string of memories.

Dumbledore's cold, still body was lying facedown at the foot of the Astronomy Tower. The words, "Her body will remain in the Chamber forever," were written on the wall in glistening red blood. The Dementors were closing in on him and Dudley in the alley at Little Winging. Quirrell was unwrapping his turban. Voldemort was possessing him at the Ministry. He was a snake, sinking his fangs into Mr. Weasley. Sirius was falling through the veil.

When the Dementors weren't around and he could think again, Harry was plagued with fears. Were his parents going crazy with worry by now? What had Sirius told them? Was Ginny OK? What was Leila thinking as she boarded the Hogwarts Express without him? What if he couldn't escape? Would Sirius risk coming back in for him? What if he was discovered in his escape? Could he survive ten years in Azkaban?"

Finally the traffic slowed in the corridors. The cell was dark, and gratefully Harry allowed his body to take its regular shape. Right. It was now or never.

Harry pushed himself shakily to his feet. He stood for a moment, bracing himself on the wall before he took a few shaky steps. Good. Now to dispose of any evidence. He fumbled around with the empty bottles, but finally all of them were safely tucked in his pockets, along with the box. Leave no traces that Aurors would be sure to find.

He closed his eyes and let the feeling of transfiguration overtake him. When he opened his eyes again, he could see clearly through the darkness. He spread his wings and rose into the air. A quick slip through the bars, a dive off the ledge, and he was soaring away into the night.

He was free.

Author's Note: There you go. Hope it didn't sound cheesy.

YAY! I went to Order of the Phoenix, and it's awesome! You'll love it. OK, OK, I still like POA better, but the movie was well done for a film that's supposed to encompass a nine-hundred page book. Daniel Radcliffe is sooooo hot....

Sorry for *another* short chapter. The next one is longer. I swear.

Chapter 25

The cold ocean wind was whipping past. He was soaring through mist and clouds. At first, Harry felt a little panicky when he realized that he had no idea which direction land was, but then his falcon instincts kicked in and he banked southwest. But even as a falcon, Harry knew his strength was failing. The four days with almost no food, and the two days with no sleep had taken their toll. He spread his wings even further and allowed the wind to carry him towards land. At last, he caught a glimpse of tiny flickering lights hundreds of feet below. He descended in slow circles, and soon located the Deadly Dagger. Landing in the alley behind the shady pub, he transformed back and slumped, exhausted, against the wall.

He had done it. He had escaped. But this was no time to celebrate. The world was spinning as Harry fought not to lose consciousness. But he was so tired. The blackness was closing in fast...

Suddenly he was being hauled roughly upward. Someone was shaking him. Harry's eyes flew open.

"Took you long enough," someone growled. "Agumenti."

Harry was instantly doused in icy water. He sputtered and coughed, but his head cleared.

"Are you coming, or am I going to have to haul you back to Grimmauld Place myself?"

That voice. It sounded familiar, but it wasn't Sirius's. "Who are you?" Harry sputtered, struggling against the man's grip on his arm.

"Lumos," the man, and Harry squinted against the light. When his eyes adjusted, he could barely make out a mop of black hair, heavily hooded eyes, and a handlebar moustache.

"Regulus?" he gasped.

“Right,” the man said, scowling. “About time you showed up. I’ve been waiting for hours. Days, if you want to get technical. Can you stand?”

Harry nodded, and Regulus released him. “Where’s Sirius?” Harry asked anxiously. “Was he captured?”

“He’s at Grimmauld Place tending to that Weasley girl” Regulus said darkly. “You were both crazy to try something so idiotic and foolish.”

“It was my idea,” Harry protested.

“So I attained. Sirius might be reckless, but he’s not stupid enough to purposely get himself locked up in Azkaban.”

“He was just helping me,” Harry explained, but he was feeling light-headed again. Without warning, his knees gave out, and Regulus dove forward to catch him.

“Idiotic boy,” the man growled. “Of course you can’t stand. Four days in Azkaban will do that to you, you know.”

Harry tried to answer, but he was finding it hard to speak.

“I couldn’t get a Portkey,” Regulus was muttering half to himself. “Of course not. I’m supposed to be dead. Apparation it is, then.”

A second later, Harry felt himself being squeezed through a tight tube. His vision was fading in and out as they landed in front of Grimmauld Place. Subconsciously he felt Regulus hauling him up the steps and through the door. Now someone else had gripped his other arm, and he was being led down the hall and into the living room. Strong arms were pushing him onto the couch. Then the blackness overtook him.

“I think he’s coming around. His eyelids just fluttered.”

“About time.”

“James and Lily are coming soon, and honestly, I don’t want to be the one to break the news. They’d kill me before I could even explain that either I helped him, or he attempted it alone.”

“You both were incredibly stupid to even attempt it. You both could’ve been killed, or worse, stuck there for years to come.”

A pause.

“I read her case files, Regulus. She was innocent. It was all Voldemort’s fault. If you’d been there and seen the conditions she was in, you’d have tried to get her out too.”

Another pause.

“How is she doing?”

“Better. Emmeline Vance has been dropping by every few hours to check on her. She’s got Ginny on Strengthening and Dreamless Sleep Potions, but other than that and making sure the girl gets three square meals a day, we’ll have to let time do the rest.”

A clock struck ten.

“You’d better wake him up. Give him a Strengthening Solution so he doesn’t look so damn weak when his parents arrive.”

“Harry. Harry!”

Harry stirred. Someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes and found Regulus looking down at him.

“Get up,” the older man said impatiently. “Your parents are here.”

Harry shakily pushed himself up. Sunlight was streaming into Sirius’s living room. “How late did I sleep?” he asked, fighting the urge to lay back down again.

“It’s ten in the morning,” Regulus replied. “Drink this while I get the door.”

Regulus left as Harry weakly lifted the glass of purple liquid to his mouth and drained it. Instantly he felt better.

Regulus reentered the room, scowling, with Harry's parents behind.

"Harry!" Lily exclaimed, rushing across the room. "Where have you been? Why weren't you at the train station yesterday? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Mum," Harry said, yawning and stretching. "I just woke up, that's all."

But Lily was looking him over, a strange glint in her eye. "Harry James Potter. Why are your clothes so filthy?"

Harry looked down. His clothes *were* filthy. His once-red shirt was now grayish brown with mud and muck, and his pants were in the same—if not worse—condition. Even his hands were several shades darker than normal.

Suddenly it all came back to him—the plan to rescue Ginny Weasley, the boat ride to Azkaban, the four days he'd spent in that horrible cell, his nighttime escape, and meeting Regulus Black behind the Deadly Dagger. But there was only one thing he cared about right now.

"Where is she?" Harry demanded, jumping to his feet.

Regulus was lingering near the door. He looked uncomfortably at Harry's parents before replying. "She's upstairs, with Sirius."

Harry dashed across the room and past Regulus, ignoring his mum's calls of, "Who's 'she'? Where are you going? Harry, come back here this instant!"

He bounded up the stairs to the second floor, vaguely aware that all three adults were following him. Racing down the hall, he quickly located the door to the room Hermione and Ginny had shared two summers previously, and pushed it open.

Sirius was sitting in a chair next the bed. When Harry entered, he looked up from the book he was reading. "Harry!" he said, breaking

into a grin. But the smile froze on his face when he saw James, Lily, and Regulus appear in the doorway behind Harry.

Harry quickly reached the end of the bed. Ginny was lying motionless on the mattress, her red hair framing her face. She was looking much better than the last time Harry had seen her. She was still small and pale, but she was sleeping peacefully, her chest rising and falling in rhythm.

"Is she going to be OK?" Harry asked quietly, looking at Sirius.

His godfather nodded, but his face was still frozen, his eyes looking past Harry to the people at the door.

Then Harry realized what he'd done. He turned slowly to face his parents. James was standing very still, but Lily had recovered her composure. "Who is that?" she said, her voice dangerously soft.

"Really, Lily, we can explain," Sirius said quickly, half rising from his chair.

"Well, someone had better," James growled.

"I think I'd better get downstairs," Regulus said hastily.

"Coward," Sirius muttered as his younger brother disappeared.

"I want answers," Lily demanded, her eyes flashing. Harry noticed that she was unconsciously fingering her wand.

"I'll explain," he said quickly, moving between his parents and Sirius. "This is Ginny Weasley."

It took five long seconds for the information to register with Lily. "No..." she said weakly. "It can't be... She's... She's in..."

"Azkaban? Not anymore," Harry said calmly. "Sirius and I got her out. OK, I got her out," he corrected, noting the panicky look on his godfather's face. "But Sirius helped."

His mother was frozen. His father's mouth was moving, though nothing was coming out.

"Chairs," Harry said, turning to Sirius, who nodded and quickly conjured up to seats for Lily and James. Wordlessly they sat, and Harry told them the whole story, beginning with the first day of summer, when he had discovered Ginny was in Azkaban, and had asked Sirius to help him become an Animagus.

"And you agreed?" Lily asked Sirius incredulously, finding her voice again.

"He didn't know what my plans were," Harry said quickly. "I just told him that I wanted to surprise you. He didn't know of my real intents." He quickly told of the summer "Transfiguration" lessons, and how when Lupin brought the diary to the Order meeting, the evidence that Ginny was innocent had only served to strengthen his resolve to rescue her. He told how he had completed his training only a week before school started.

"You actually achieved a full Animagus transformation in only a couple of months?" James said skeptically, running a hand through his messy hair.

In lieu of reply, Harry concentrated, and a moment later he was a falcon. He flew once around the room before transforming back.

James broke into a proud grin. "Wow, Harry! I'm impressed!"

"James!" Lily said, smacking him. "He did it illegally, and without our permission!"

"So did I," James countered. "Anyway, continue with your story."

A little embarrassed, Harry explained how he'd planned to slip away a week before school started, but had tripped over Sirius as Padfoot, who had forced him to reveal where he was going in the middle of the night, then offered to help. Upon hearing this tidbit of information, Lily looked angry enough to start throwing hexes at Sirius, but James put a restraining hand on her arm.

“Why did Sirius offer to help?” Harry’s dad asked.

“He knew he couldn’t stop me, so he figured I’d have a better chance of both surviving and succeeding if he helped me,” Harry said flatly, and James nodded.

Harry told of how together they had schemed up a plan that had the possibility of working, and how Sirius had come the next morning with a good excuse to take Harry for a week.

“I knew you’d never mentioned that trip before,” Lily said triumphantly.

“Where did you go when you left the house?” James inquired.

“Diagon Alley,” Harry said promptly, then explained how they’d purchased the necessary potions, retrieved the case files from Ravenclaw Archives, and convinced an Auror to give them the official visitation rights. Then he told how they’d flooed to the Deadly Dagger and taken the morning boat to Azkaban. When he got to the part where he and Ginny traded places and Ginny left with Sirius, though, Lily leapt to her feet, her wand pointed at Sirius’s chest.

“You left my son in AZKABAN?” she cried furiously.

“Mum! I made him!” Harry shouted, jumping between his mum and godfather. “There was no way I’d have been able to get Ginny out of Azkaban. Sirius wasn’t affected by the Dementors like I was. Besides, my Animagus form was much better for escaping than his. I was there for four days, and then I slipped out a window and flew to shore. I promise, I would have come earlier, but I couldn’t get away.”

James was strangely quiet, but Lily’s face was beet red. “I can’t believe you did it!” she cried. “You could’ve been killed. What you did was stupid, irresponsible, and foolish...”

James had risen from his chair, and now he placed his hand on Lily’s shoulder. “And it was exactly what I’d have done if you’d been in Ginny’s place,” he said quietly.

That silenced Lily.

“Look, Mum, Dad,” Harry said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I’m really sorry for worrying you. But she was innocent, and I had to do something. It’s over now, and all of us are OK, so don’t be mad, please?”

Lily looked stricken. “I’m not mad, Harry, I was just so worried... and shocked. I’m just glad you’re safe...” She quickly closed the gap and enveloped him in a hug. Without warning Harry’s knees gave away. “James, help me!” Lily gasped as she struggled to support him.

“Harry, what’s the matter?” James asked worriedly as he and Lily lowered Harry into a chair.

“I’ll bet the Strengthening Solution wore off,” Sirius said. “And he probably didn’t eat any of the prison food, did you, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “Well, a little,” he mumbled, fighting the blackness that was enveloping his vision. The room was spinning and his parents’ faces were blurry.

“Toss me another Strengthening Solution,” Lily said. “Here, James, help me. Tilt his head up.”

“I can drink it myself,” Harry muttered thickly.

Lily snorted. “Yeah, and James is horrible at Quidditch, Leila’s a morning person, and Sirius here has good taste in girls.”

“Hey!” Sirius squawked indignantly.

Harry felt his chin being tilted back, and a second later a slightly sweet liquid was being poured down his throat. He coughed, then opened his eyes.

“Right,” said Lily briskly. “Before that potion wears off, you are going to take a shower and eat a decent meal. Go! I’ll lay out some clothes for you. Then you’re taking a very long nap until you feel better.”

Author’s Note: I honestly can’t think of anything to say, for once. I guess it’s too late at night.

Oh well... SEVEN DAYS TILL JULY 21! Is anyone else out there going crazy with excitement like me?

I guess I did remember something I need to say. I'm leaving for the weekend, so probably no more posts until Sunday night.

Chapter 26

It didn't take long for the news to spread around the Order that Sirius Black and Harry Potter had successfully busted Ginny Weasley out of Azkaban. After Harry's much-needed shower, he had eaten a bowl of Lily's chicken soup and promptly fallen asleep on Sirius's couch again. The next morning, he awoke to a trickle of visitors that quickly turned into a stream over the following days. Lily and James agreed to let him stay at Grimmauld Place for a few days before heading off to Hogwarts so he could both recover his strength and be near Ginny. So Wednesday morning found Harry sipping a cup of orange juice on the couch when the first visitor arrived.

Emmeline Vance clucked and fretted over Harry and finally prescribed nutrient-replenishing potions and at least four days of bed rest.

"Four days?" Harry yelped. He was anxious to get to Hogwarts.

"Four days," said Lily firmly. She had apparated over earlier that morning before Harry had awakened.

It was no use arguing. Harry found that without the Strengthening Solution he had almost no energy at all. Simply walking to the bathroom took all his effort.

Sitting still was not something that came naturally to Harry, but Sirius and James supplied him with a whole stack of Quidditch magazines to keep him occupied. Lily, on the other hand, had different ideas. Halfway through the morning, she disappeared and returned a few minutes later carrying a stack of textbooks. Harry looked up from the game of Exploding Snap he was playing with his godfather, who had come downstairs to see how he was.

"I picked these up for you when I took Leila to Diagon Alley last week," she said brightly. "It's a good thing I didn't send your trunk on to Hogwarts when you didn't show up on Monday. Now you can keep up with the classes you're missing!"

Harry and Sirius exchanged incredulous looks. "Lily, he's supposed to be *relaxing!*" Sirius protested.

"That's no excuse for not keeping up," Lily said briskly, plopping the stack of books down on the coffee table and pushing her hair out of her face.

Harry was saved from replying by the buzz of the doorbell. "Oh, who could that be?" his mother snapped, and scurried off to answer the door.

"Well," said Sirius, "some things never change."

"Was she like this when you went to school together?" Harry asked curiously.

"Worse," Sirius said, grinning. "Once she and James started going out in our sixth year, she never left the Marauders alone. 'Sirius, do your Potions essay!' 'For goodness sake, Peter, a Colliavor is the core of a Filisky Tree, not part of a Christmas wreath!' 'James, you prat, study those diagrams for the test tomorrow!'" He laughed. "It was only because of her that James, Peter, and I got the number of N.E.W.T.'s we did. Of course, she and Remus got along fine. He'd been telling us to study for years, and having Lily around was like a dream come true... Oh, hi, Remus! We were just talking about you."

Harry looked up. Lupin had just stomped through the door, red-faced. He ignored Sirius's greeting.

Harry's stomach sank; he had completely forgotten about Lupin when he had made his plans to rescue Ginny. He gulped nervously. *I'm in for it!*

And 'in for it' he was. Lupin shouted for five minutes straight at Harry and Sirius, but there was nothing he said that Harry's mum hadn't already lectured him about. Besides, every time Lupin's back was turned, Sirius imitated him or made funny faces. It was a struggle for Harry not to laugh. Finally when Lupin had wound down, he looked exasperatedly at the pair and sighed.

"I suppose asking you two to be repentant is like asking the sun to rise in the west," he said resignedly.

"Damn right," Sirius said, winking at Harry.

"Old Marauder saying," Lupin said. "If you're going to break rules, do it with no regrets."

When James came to Grimmauld Place at lunchtime, he tossed a Daily Prophet at Harry, who caught it.

"SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD GINEVRA WEASLEY ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN! Aurors Find No Traces of Outside Help," the front headline read.

"Perfect job, Harry," James said, grinning as he threw himself into an armchair. "No evidence, no clues. She 'escaped' four days after you and Sirius 'left'—most likely Sirius won't even be questioned. My son, the first ever to escape from Azkaban!"

"James! It's nothing to be proud of!" Lily snapped as she entered the room carrying a tray of food.

James didn't reply, but he gave Harry a thumbs up when Lily's back was turned.

After lunch, several more Order members dropped by, including Moody, Shacklebolt, Elphias Doge, and Augusta Longbottom. Each had their own lectures to give, usually along the lines of how foolish the whole thing was, the risks, and how both Sirius and Harry should be thankful they weren't in Azkaban right now. But they all ended with some form of, "that was really quite impressive." Moody even slapped Harry on the back and said he'd be looking for him in the Auror training program in a few years.

When Augusta Longbottom left, she cautioned them not to say anything to Alice or Frank about their part in the rescue. "They're on the Weasley case," she explained. "I'm sure they already know who did it, but if you come out and say it outright, they'd be required by law to report it to the Auror Department."

Fortunately not all of the visitors came to lecture. “I can’t believe you did it!” Kiara cried as she bounced out of the fire. “The whole Auror Department is talking about it. Don’t worry,” she said at Harry’s alarmed look. “I’m not on the case, so I won’t tell on you. But what you did was a stroke of genius. Did you come up with the plan by yourself?”

“Sirius helped,” Harry said modestly.

“Bloody brilliant if you ask me,” she said, sitting in one of the chairs and resting her chin in her hands. “So, what was it like?”

“What was what like?”

“Azkaban, of course!” she exclaimed. “Was it scary?”

“Er... Not too bad...”

“Oh, don’t be modest,” she said, tossing her braids. “Tell me about it!”

“Kiara, he’s supposed to be *resting*,” Lily reprimanded from the door.

“Sorry, Lily. I was just curious, that’s all.” She turned back to Harry, her eyes sparkling. “You should hear the Aurors talking about it, though. They’re completely baffled. Some people think Ginny is a Riya—that’s a super powerful witch. The last one recorded in history was Merlin’s mother. Others think she’s a Metamorphagus, but no one has thought of an Animagus transformation yet. And I won’t be the one to bring it up.”

As the afternoon wore on, Harry was surprised to see the headmistress herself step out of the fire. Harry braced himself for a lecture, but to his surprise, one never came.

“I suppose anything I might say has already been said,” McGonagall said primly. “So I will only say that I am very impressed at what you pulled off. Though your actions were rash and foolish, your motives were commendable.” She paused, then lowered her voice. “Especially when your current circumstances are taken into consideration.”

Harry knew she was referring to the Aperio.

"I will expect you back at school on Sunday evening," she continued briskly. "You will not be required to make up your homework, but I will expect you to know the material for your N.E.W.T.'s. You may floo directly into my office at six on Sunday. Don't be late."

He nodded, and she stepped back into the fire and vanished.

An hour later, Sirius came downstairs. "How's Ginny?" Harry asked at once.

"Still sleeping," Sirius replied. "She's definitely got a long road to recovery before her, but in time she'll be fine."

"Has the Weasley family found out yet?"

"Not yet. They've been being grilled by Aurors all today, so I thought it was best not to tell them until the investigations are over. That should be tomorrow, according to my sources."

Thursday brought another crowd of Order visitors. Around mid-afternoon, at Sirius's request, Arthur Weasley apparated over.

"Have a seat, Arthur," Sirius invited.

"Thank you," the balding man replied, sinking wearily into a chair and massaging his temples. "Good Lord, the Aurors have been swarming our house for three days." He sighed. "I think they finally have decided that we really don't have a clue where she is or how she got out."

"Well, that's kind of why we invited you over," Sirius said, glancing over at Harry for approval before continuing. He related the entire story from beginning to end. By the time he finished, Mr. Weasley was in tears.

"You have no idea what this means to us," he said, wiping his eyes and shaking their hands. "Especially you, Harry. Why did you do it?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "She was innocent," he mumbled. "I had to do something."

Mr. Weasley withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose, but he was beaming. "I can't afford to reward you," he said.

"It's OK," Harry insisted.

"Bless you, dear boy, for what you've done." Then Mr. Weasley asked to see his daughter, and Sirius consented, but only after warning him about Ginny's condition.

After that, the line of redhead visitors never seemed to end. By Friday morning, all the Weasleys except for Ron had been over to thank Harry and Sirius, and to visit Ginny. Harry found these visits embarrassing. Mrs. Weasley had enveloped him in a bone-crushing hug and had tearfully thanked him repeatedly. Percy had shaken his hand gravely, then rushed from the room, also wiping tears away. Bill had simply been ecstatic.

But by far, the most embarrassing visit was from the twins.

"Harry, that was brilliant!" Fred cried, bounding through the door, his twin in tow. Their hair was windswept from apparating. Sirius had warned the Weasleys not to use the Floo Network, as their fireplace might be under surveillance, as well as any owls they might send or receive.

"Completely mad," said George, plopping down on the opposite couch.

"You're our hero, mate," Fred said sincerely.

"What you did was totally awesome! Right under the Ministry's nose."

"Have you read the papers? If you ever went public, you'd be a celebrated hero."

"Or a convict, more likely," Harry mumbled. "They'd chuck me back in Azkaban, *with* anti-Animagus wards."

"But you'd get out again," George said confidently. "You were incredible!"

"If you ever need anything from us, mate, just ask!"

"Yeah. You saved our little sister. We owe you one big."

"I'll say," said Fred, looking at Harry with new interest. "We had no idea you liked Ginny so much."

"Well, we thought you fancied her a little during her first year..."

"Did not," Harry protested, his face growing hot.

The twins exchanged knowing glances. "Right," said George sarcastically. "Listen Harry, you just risked your life getting our sister out of Azkaban. In our opinion, it's about the same as declaring your undying love."

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Fred and George just smirked at him. "Denial isn't just a river in Egypt, mate."

"You'll come around," Fred said confidently.

"And when you do, you've got our blessing."

"She's partly yours now anyway."

Harry was glad when they left. His face felt like it was on fire from embarrassment.

When Saturday finally arrived, Harry woke up, feeling perfectly fine. Too bad his mum didn't feel the same way.

"Harry James Potter!" she yelled for the ninth time that morning, and Harry groaned. "If I see you move an inch from that couch one more time, so help me I'll keep you home from school for a month!"

"Mum, I'm fine!" Harry called, exasperated. He had tried to sneak upstairs to check on Ginny, but Lily had ears like a hawk.

In truth, he was feeling much better. He'd gained back some of the weight he'd lost in Azkaban, thanks to his mother's cooking, and almost all of his energy was back. But he seriously wasn't used to all the pampering and coddling he was getting. He hated being treated like an invalid.

"Mum, I'm just going upstairs for a moment."

Lily protested profusely, but in the end, Harry won out. He quickly climbed the stairs before she could change her mind. When he pushed Ginny's door open, he found Sirius again reading a book next to Ginny's bedside.

"Hey, Harry."

Harry pulled up a chair. "How's she doing?"

"Good, good," Sirius said cheerfully, closing his book and folding over the corner of the page he'd been reading. "She's woken up a couple of times, but only long enough to take some potions and eat a few bites. Emmeline Vance has been by every two hours to check on her as well, and she said Ginny's doing marvelously for the length of time she spent in Azkaban. I wonder how she kept any memories at all. Azkaban is supposed to drain all happy memories from a person. She remembers her parents, though, and Hogwarts, and she remembered you."

"I guess those weren't happy memories," Harry said quietly. "She thinks her parents hate her for opening the Chamber because they didn't show up for her trial. Hogwarts was supposed to be a wonderful place for her, but with Riddle it turned into living hell. I don't know why she remembers me." That wasn't true, but Harry wasn't about to tell Sirius the truth, that she'd liked him, and he'd ignored her. At least in the other world.

Sirius looked thoughtful. "Hmmm. I believe you're right, Harry. Another reason why we must keep the Weasleys visits limited to when she's asleep. Ginny hasn't been awake when they've visited yet, and though Molly has been begging for me to let her stay here, I can't allow it. The Aurors might catch onto something. When Ginny is

stronger, I'll explain everything to her, and only then will she be in any condition to see her parents again."

They were both silent for awhile. Harry noticed that the book on the nightstand was a thick paperback. "What are you reading?" he asked curiously.

"Les Miserables," Sirius replied, holding it up. "It's about this ex-convict..."

"I know what it's about," Harry said, grinning. He'd heard about the book from Hermione in their first year. She'd gone on and on for weeks about how Muggle literature ought to be added as a class. ("I've talked to all the older students and Professor Haluska doesn't even touch on it in Muggle Studies.")

"Right, your mum," said Sirius, misinterpreting Harry's smile. "I'll bet she's read it at least three times. I think I remember hearing her talk about it at Hogwarts. Hey, about that, when are you going back?"

"Tomorrow," Harry said promptly. "McGonagall is letting me floo into her office." Then he remembered. "Wait—aren't you supposed to be at school too?"

"School? Oh, I just told McGonagall I'd be a little late." Sirius laughed. "Poor little first years will have to wait an extra week before they learn how to fly."

Harry laughed too, and on the bed, Ginny stirred. He glanced anxiously at Sirius, who raised one finger to his lips.

"Will I have to call you 'Professor'?" Harry asked, lowering his voice.

As Sirius considered this, a mischievous look came into his eye. "Professor Black. I rather like that. Hey, I can take points too, can't I?" His godfather grinned evilly. "Watch out Slytherins!"

"Do I detect a hint of favoritism?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"Never!" Sirius exclaimed in mock horror. "Let's just say they're going to get what they've deserved for years."

Author's Note: Many of you have written reviews and are anxious that Hermione is to be left out of the story completely. I assure you that this is not true. She will play a very important role, but that isn't till later on in the story. But never fear, she will appear!

Others of you are afraid that Ron and Harry are going to be at each others' throats all through the story. This is not true either. I'm sorry if Harry seems a little unrealistic in not missing his friends (yes, he does miss them! I just can't picture him **pinning** for them). Harry's had a lot on his mind lately, with his parents and Sirius and all. And rescuing Ginny.

Please, trust the author!

I'm planning on having most of the story written by next weekend. I probably won't have it finished, though, and it definately won't all be posted up here. I've been posting every two days, in case you haven't noticed.

Chapter 27

Sunday evening couldn't come quickly enough for Harry. He was tired of being pampered, babied, and fussed over. At five till six he was standing in front of Sirius's fireplace, trunk in hand.

"Are you sure you want to go back tonight? I can owl Minerva and tell her you're going to stay here a few more days to recover," Lily fretted. "You're still too thin."

"I'm FINE, Mum!" Harry said for the hundredth time that day.

"Let him go, Lily," James said, grinning. "Can't you see he'd much rather be there with his friends than here with us old codgers?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Sirius jumped in first. "It's no use denying it, Harry. We were once your age, weren't we, *Prongs*?" he prompted, elbowing Harry's dad in the ribs.

"That's right, *Padfoot*," James glanced at his watch. "You'd better get going, son. McGonagall's not that big on untimely people. You should've seen the detentions she gave us for being late to her class after the full moon..."

Harry moved towards the fireplace, but suddenly Lily darted forward, hugged him, and kissed his cheeks. Harry hurriedly stepped into the fire before any of them could see how red his face was.

"McGonagall's office," he said loudly, and a moment later dozens of fireplaces were spinning past. Finally he flew out and sprawled on the rug in the headmistress's office.

McGonagall looked up from a pile of reports she was reading at her desk. "Mister Potter. Right on time."

Harry quickly stood and brushed the soot from his robes. He started to pick up his trunks, but McGonagall stopped him with a wave of her hand. "That won't be necessary. I have a few things I need to discuss with you before you leave." She quickly rounded the desk and with a flick of her wand, Harry's trunk disappeared. "Please, have a seat."

Harry sat, and looked at her expectantly. “Just two things, Mr. Potter,” she said briskly. “First, you may be wondering if you will be allowed to attend Order meetings while at school.” Harry hadn’t even thought of this, but didn’t say so. “Under normal circumstances, my answer would be no. But because of your role in the Aperio, I have come to the conclusion that you deserve to be involved in the Order as much as possible.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said gratefully.

“Second, the school owl I sent last Saturday returned with this,” she said, holding up a plump letter. “Most likely you were in Azkaban, where mail is not allowed.” She tossed him the letter, and curiously, he ripped it open. Two gold badges fell out.

Harry stared. “But...this is a prefect badge!”

McGonagall’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes, Mr. Potter, that is indeed a prefect badge. What were you expecting?”

“I’m ... I’m a *prefect*?”

Harry could have sworn McGonagall actually looked amused. “Yes, Harry, you are a prefect. I’m supposing you weren’t one in the other reality?”

He shook his head. “Ron got the badge. Dumbledore said I had enough on my shoulders with the prophecy and all.” He examined the other badge. “I was Quidditch Captain though.”

She nodded approvingly. “Good. You’ll want to speak to Ms. Patil—she’s the other Gryffindor prefect from your year—about patrol schedules and duties. Obviously you missed the first meeting on the Hogwarts Express.”

McGonagall fell silent. Harry was about to excuse himself when she looked up again. “It has just occurred to me that you might not know which classes you’re enrolled in,” she said.

Harry shook his head, and she fished around in a drawer. "Ah, here it is. Harry Potter, seventh year. Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Astronomy, Ancient Runes."

"Ancient Runes?" Harry yelped.

She looked at him over her spectacles. "I take it you've never cracked an Ancient Runes textbook in your life, have you? Very well, I'll inform Professor Darryl you're dropping the class. Anything else?"

"Astronomy," he said. "I dropped it after O.W.L.'s."

"Astronomy too, then," McGonagall said briskly, making notes on a parchment. "That's a minimal schedules for a seventh year. Any classes you'd like to pick up?"

"Potions, I guess," Harry said after a moment's thought. "I was told I'd have to get a Potions N.E.W.T. if I wanted to become an Auror." *You told me that*, he thought, but didn't voice that particular piece of information.

"Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Defence," she said. "Anything else?"

"I was decent in Herbology."

"Herbology too," she said, tapping a piece of paper. "Here's your schedule. You'd better get downstairs if you want dinner."

Harry thanked her and left, clutching his badges. He paused at the bottom of the moving staircase to pin them to his school robes before making for the Great Hall.

The school corridors were almost empty. A few stragglers were heading for the hall, and a few students who had finished early were on their way to their dormitories. Harry marveled at how nice it was to walk through the halls without people pointing, staring, or gawking. Or asking for autographs. He sped up a bit, his stomach growling. As he rounded the corner, he met a group of Ravenclaw third years exiting the Great Hall and stepped aside to let them pass before entering.

The Great Hall hadn't changed at all. The four tables still stretched all the way from the entrance to the teachers' table. Harry quickly made his way between the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables towards Leila, who was sitting near the front. She was deep in conversation with Parvati Patil and hadn't noticed Harry when he came in. He waited until he was right behind her, then said loudly, "Move over, squirt. You're hogging all the seat room!"

Leila spun around so fast that she knocked over her goblet of pumpkin juice. "Harry!" she squealed, and threw her arms around him.

"Honestly," Parvati said disdainfully, daintily wiping the pumpkin juice off her robes with a napkin. "You're prefects, for heaven's sake. The first years are watching."

Leila released Harry, and he looked her over, noting the shiny badge she wore on her robes. "Wait. You're a prefect too? You never told... Um, of course you're a prefect. Just kidding," he finished hastily, catching her glare and Parvati's puzzled look.

"Sit down, sit down!" Leila said quickly, shoving a couple of first years over to make room. "I'm glad you're Quidditch Captain, Harry. Merlin knows we need a better team than last year. It wasn't Katie's fault, of course, but we had a horrible Seeker, and that makes all the difference. All the other teams have already started practicing. Did you know Draco Malfoy's captain of the Slytherin team? Nasty git. Probably the only reason he got to be Seeker in the first place was his father's donation of new brooms. And he's Slughorn's little pet. When are you going to hold tryouts? We need a new Chaser, and last year's Beaters were awful! And our Seeker left too..." She would have continued, but Parvati had just cleared her throat pointedly.

"Is Quidditch all you two care about?" she huffed. "I'm leaving. Harry, you're on patrol duty with Susan Bones tonight from nine to eleven. Don't be late." She stomped off, and Leila watched her go with a satisfied expression on her face.

"Now that she's gone," she said, shoving away her plate, "tell me everything."

"Wait—all that Quidditch talk—it was just to get rid of *Parvati*?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Leila shrugged. "Now talk."

Harry laughed. "I've never met anyone like you before," he said sincerely.

"You're getting off topic again!" she exclaimed, scowling.

"OK, OK, I'll talk," Harry said, grinning. "But let me get some food first before it disappears." He quickly loaded up his plate and between bites he told her the whole tale.

"Wow," she said when he had finished. "When you didn't show up for the train Mum and Dad were so worried and I was about to start pulling my hair out. Mum wrote me that night and said she'd been sending Sirius and you owls all day long but Sirius wasn't responding and all yours were coming back unopened."

"No wonder," he interjected sarcastically. "I was a little tied up in Azkaban at the moment."

"Anyway," Leila continued, "she sent me a letter the next morning saying that she'd heard from Sirius and the two of you had been stopped at Wizarding Customs." She snorted. "Customs, my foot. Anyway, Mum said she and Dad were apparating over to chew Sirius out for having you back late, so I knew you were safe. But when Mum said you weren't coming to school for a few days, I nearly went crazy with worry. I shouldn't have, though. It sounds as if you got the royal treatment."

"Too much of it," Harry said darkly. "Hey, Leila?"

"Yeah?"

"Do me a favor, will you?"

"What?"

"Tell me who those professors are," he said, pointing towards the staff table. "Just in case one decides to talk to me."

"That's Flitwick," she began, but he cut her off.

"I know him. I know Haluska, Grubbly-Plank, Moody, Slughorn, Vector, and Sinestra. But who's that woman sitting next to Moody?"

"That's Luzita Clark," Leila said, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "She's the new Transfiguration teacher. I don't like her."

"Why not?"

"She favors Slytherins," Leila said simply. "That's Professor Daryl next to McGonagall. She teaches Ancient Runes. On the very end is Palmer, he teaches Divination."

"Great. Clark, Darryl, and Palmer. I think I can remember that," Harry said, ticking them off on his fingers. By now the hall was emptying out. "Can I ask you one more favor?"

"Just one," Leila said, smirking. "Then I start charging for services."

"Can you stick close to me tonight in the Common Room? Just in case someone I don't now starts talking to me?"

"Done."

As they joined the Gryffindor stragglers on their way to the Common Room, Harry was amazed at how many people he didn't know. Had seventeen years made *that* much difference in the student body? *I guess so*, he thought. *I mean, none of the Muggle-borns will be here, unless they've hidden their lineage from the Ministry.*

"When are you going to schedule Quidditch tryouts?" Leila asked, breaking through his thoughts as they started up the staircase to the seventh floor.

"Er... Dunno," Harry said. "I guess I'll have to check and see when the pitch is free." Now they were approaching the Fat Lady. "Leila, what's the password?"

"Jupiter's moon," she replied, and the portrait swung open.

The Common Room was packed full of Gryffindors. Leila and Harry headed toward the chairs in front of the fire, but before they got there

they were intercepted by a tall dark-skinned boy and a girl who looked to be a few years younger.

“Oi, Harry! Where have you been, mate?” the boy said. Harry was sure he’d seen him somewhere before.

“Hi Jeremy, Melissa,” Leila said pointedly, elbowing Harry hard. *Oh yeah. The bloke from the birthday party. The one who’s supposed to be my best friend.*

He suddenly realized that they were looking at him expectantly. “Oh, er, I got malaria when Sirius and I went to the Bahamas. You know my mum, she went ballistic and kept me home for a week.”

They seemed to accept this answer. “So, how was the first week of school?” Harry asked lamely.

“Alright, I guess,” Jeremy said, guiding the group over toward the fireplace. He threw himself into one of the armchairs and hung his long legs over the side. Leila and Melissa claimed the sofa and immediately began whispering excitedly. Harry sat in the other armchair and looked at Jeremy. “That Clark woman is a hag,” the black boy continued, throwing a nasty look at the whispering girls.

“Yeah, Leila was telling me about her,” Harry said, relieved to have common ground to talk about. “What’s she like?”

Jeremy made a face. “Horrible. Put McGonagall, Moody, and Vector together and you won’t even come close. Plus she’s always giving Slytherins points for nothing at all. You’ll see, tomorrow morning.”

Harry groaned audibly.

“At least she’s not bloody annoying like Slughorn,” Jeremy said consolingly. ““Oh, Mr. Finnegan, that’s a beautiful potion you’ve brewed! I’ll have to inform your insert-realitive-here-who-did-something-to-make-them-bloody-famous of your progress!””

Harry laughed. “Yeah, I remember.” *I haven’t been in Potions since O.W.L. year*, he reminded himself. “I heard my mum talking about him too. Evidently she was one of his favorites in school.”

"You're just lucky you're not in Potions," Jeremy said, scowling.

"Actually," Harry said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, "I picked it up again this year." At Jeremy's incredulous expression, he hastened to explain. "My mum tutored me during the summer. I want to at least try for an N.E.W.T.," he lied quickly.

"Wow!" Jeremy's eyes widened. "On top of all your other classes? You're going to be dead meat."

"Well... actually..." Now was as good a time as any to drop the bomb. "I've seen McGonagall and she's letting me drop Astronomy and Ancient Runes," Harry said very quickly. No need to mention picking up Herbology too if the subject didn't arise.

"But *why*?"

Harry was almost out of excuses, but he had one card left. "You can't tell anyone, OK?" he said quietly, leaning forward, and Jeremy nodded. "I want to become an Auror."

"Blimey! You're mad!"

Harry grinned. "I suppose I am. I decided over the summer, so my mum and godfather have been helping me out. I've got to raise my grades and pull an N.E.W.T. in Potions, but if I work hard I think I can do it."

Jeremy didn't say anything for a while. Harry watched the fire and strained his ears to catch strains of the girls' conversation.

"When we had career meetings in our fifth year, I told McGonagall I wanted to be a Curse Breaker," Jeremy said suddenly. "I always thought it would be cool, and Ancient Runes was always my favorite class."

Harry looked up. "That's cool! Isn't Bill Weasley a Curse Breaker?"

"Yeah, and I've always wanted Ron to introduce me to him, but we've never been on the best of terms. Especially because I'm friends with you."

Harry frowned. That bad, was it? He really needed to do something about Ron. "Yeah, well..."

"Thought of any good pranks, mate?" Jeremy asked. "We still need to get him back for putting those love potions in our drinks last year."

Harry bit back his curiosity. "Uh, yeah." *Mental reminder: Ask Leila who I fell for under the Love Potion last year. That's it, Ron is going down.* "How did he ever brew a Love Potion, anyway? He's not brilliant at Potions."

"I guess he got one of those Ravenclaws he's always hanging around to do it," Jeremy said, shrugging. "So, about the pranks..."

"I've got a few good ones," Harry replied evasively. "Let me think about it."

"So, when's our first Quidditch Practice?" Jeremy asked, changing the subject.

"Er..." Harry said. Was Jeremy on the team? He looked desperately at Leila, but she was still engaged in a fit of whispers with Melissa. "I've got to hold tryouts first. Um... new Seeker."

"Oh, that's right." Jeremy leaned back in his chair and threw a sly glance at Harry. "So...do I get my spot back, or do I have to show up for tryouts?"

"Uh..." At this rate Jeremy was going to think Harry was nutters. He couldn't even speak in complete sentences.

Leila suddenly looked up from her conversation. "Maybe Harry will let you back on the team if you promise to aim Bludgers at the opposing team instead of Gryffindors," she shot at him. "And definitely not at the teachers' stands like that incident during our final game last year. McGonagall looked mad enough to ban you permanently from Quidditch."

Harry choked back a laugh. *Jeremy hit a Bludger at the teachers? I can just see McGonagall's face.*

Jeremy's cheeks turned darker, if that was possible, but he grinned good-naturedly. "I swear, Leila, you're going to bring that up every opportunity for the rest of my life."

Her green eyes sparkled. "You bet," she replied.

Harry flashed a grateful smile at her. He now knew that Jeremy was a Beater. *Who's the other one?*

Almost as if she could read his mind, Leila tossed her head and said, "Jack wasn't too bad, but I still think you should hold Beater tryouts. Maybe someone else with real talent will surface."

"Yeah," Harry said, making another mental note. *I should get a Pensieve. It'd sure come in useful now.* "Since this is my first year as Quidditch Captain, I was going to make everyone try out," he said neutrally, putting an emphasis on 'everyone.' Leila glared at him.

"Good idea, mate," Jeremy said. "Who're we going to get for a Seeker?"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't sure how the team—whoever they were—would take his plan of switching to Seeker. He was fairly decent Keeper, thanks to Leila's help during the summer, but he'd never be good enough to Keep in a full-fledged game. Besides, he had an idea of who *would* make a good Gryffindor Keeper. Getting the person to consent would be the problem.

"We need a Chaser, too," Jeremy was saying. "We're going to have to look to find someone as good as Katie was, though."

"Mmmmmm," Harry said, staring at the fire, and making a list in his mind of the possibilities. Jeremy was still talking about Quidditch, but he kept getting interrupted by people coming over to say hi to Harry. Harry repeated his story to Seamus Finnigan, Jack Sloper, Andrew Kirk, Lavendar Brown, and several other students whose names Leila also conveniently provided.

Eventually Jeremy excused himself to do some revising, commenting enviously when he learned that Harry didn't have to make up his missed homework. Since Leila was still absorbed with talking to

Jeremy's sister, Harry decided to wander down to the Quidditch pitch to see when the other teams had booked practices. At first he thought he would just transform and go out the window in his dormitory, but Lily had warned him not to try another Animagus transformation for at least a week—something about his diminished magic levels after the four days in Azkaban. The second option, though less appealing, was simply to walk to the front doors and fly from there. In his dorm, Harry grabbed his Firebolt, then picked up his Invisibility Cloak and Marauders' Map along out of instinct before he headed back down the stairs.

"I'm going down to the pitch," he told Leila as he passed her.

"I can see that," she sniffed. "Just be back by nine for prefect duties."

"Bugger! I forgot!" Harry exclaimed, paling. *Now I'm sounding like Ron.* He leaned over the back of the couch and lowered his voice. "What do I do? Where am I supposed to meet the other Prefect?"

Leila smirked at him. "I never thought I'd see the day my oh-so-exalted older brother asks me how to do simple Prefect duties."

"It's not my fault," he protested. "I've never... I mean... Stop laughing at me!"

It took a few more Please's and People are watching's before Leila finally noticed the odd glances Melissa was throwing them and told Harry that he needed to meet Susan outside the Great Hall and just follow her lead. "I'll get you back," Harry hissed as he straightened up.

"I'd like to see you try," Leila said airily, and Harry decided to leave the conversation there.

Author's Note: Writers' Block is a horrible thing. And I had major Writers' Block on this chapter. It's time to swing into a new part of the plot, though, so bear with me as I use a few chapters to explain Hogwarts' current state, the students who are still there (no, Hermione is not at Hogwarts—that shouldn't leave too many more options for you to guess where she is), and to set things up for the next major plot turn.

Thanks for your many cool reviews! I love you guys!

Thanks to Andy for beta-ing this chapter for me.

Chapter 28

"Tryouts are tomorrow night," Harry announced as he slid in next to Leila on Monday morning. She was eating breakfast at the Gryffindor table.

"Where were you? Breakfast's almost over," she chided, popping a muffin in her mouth.

Harry yawned and pulled the basket of toast closer. "I slept in. Just tired, that's all. I would have gone to bed early, but someone put me on patrol duties. Do you know where I can get some type of Prefect schedule?"

"Ask Parvati, she's Head Girl," Leila said. "Anyway, what was that you were saying about Quidditch tryouts?"

"Tuesday evening," Harry said. "I'll post a notice in the Common Room later." He lowered his voice. "Leila, I really shouldn't be Captain. I don't know half the people anymore. What if someone notices that I keep forgetting names and other important things?"

"They won't notice," she said confidently. "I'll tell you almost everything you need to know."

"Almost everything?"

"Well, obviously I can't tell you anything I don't know myself," she said, grinning. "But I know quite a bit."

Harry arched his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I went out with Jeremy for a few months last year," she explained. "He told me everything the two of you have ever done, all the girls you ever liked, et cetera."

He groaned. "I don't think I want to know." Then he remembered something from his conversation with Jeremy the night before. "On second thought, maybe it would be best to get the worst over quickly. Who did I fall for after Ron put a Love Potion in my drink?"

Leila's eyes widened, and she collapsed into a fit of giggles that attracted the stares of a bunch of third years. "Oh... Merlin, I forgot about that..."she gasped. "It was Parvati. She was sitting closest, after all. You kissed her right in front of everyone."

"That's why she's been acting so cold towards me," Harry groaned, slapping his head. "How embarrassing."

"Jeremy was worse off than you," she insisted. "He snogged Pansy Parkinson, who happened to walk by at the wrong moment. He had the entire Slytherin house trying to hex him for weeks."

Harry laughed. "Well, Jeremy and I are going to get Ron back. He'll wish he'd never messed with us."

"That's the Harry I remember," said Leila, looking pleased. "Just let me be there to watch, won't you?"

"Deal," Harry said cheerfully. "Where is Ron, anyway? I haven't seen him at all."

"Most likely avoiding you," she said, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "I suspect he's rather embarrassed that he really owes you one now, with you rescuing Ginny and all."

"I forgot about that." Harry frowned. "That could make things difficult."

"What things?"

"Trying to make friends with him."

She snorted. "You're more likely to make friends with Draco Malfoy."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table where Malfoy was laughing rudely at something Blaise Zabini said. "That's not very likely," he admitted, "but I do have an idea."

"Hmmm..."Leila said after Harry had disclosed his plan. "It might work... Maybe..." Then she glanced at her watch, and her face paled. "Good Lord... We're going to be late for classes, and I left my bag in the Common Room!"

Harry quickly downed the last slice of toast with a swig of pumpkin juice. "Right. Don't want to get Clark mad at me on my first day back."

Amid the noise of Gryffindors and Slytherins entering the Transfiguration classroom, Harry threaded his way through the tables, looking for a seat. "Oi, mate, over here," Jeremy called, and Harry gratefully sank into the chair next to him and looked around. It looked as if most of his classmates had continued Transfiguration, including Neville, who looked much more confident than Harry remembered. He was sitting with a Gryffindor girl Harry didn't know and chatting amicably with her.

"You're lucky you didn't have the homework," Jeremy said with a scowl as he pulled a parchment from his bag. "This essay took me four hours to write on Saturday."

"What's it on?" Harry asked curiously.

"Vanishing Spells," Jeremy said glumly. "We're doing crickets. She thinks that if we learn the theory—hence the essay—we'll do better in the actual class work, but it's sure not working for me."

Vanishing Spells. We did those ages ago. Leila wasn't kidding about the corrupted curriculum problem.

The last few stragglers were entering the classroom. Harry looked up just in time to see Ron slinking in, purposely avoiding Harry's eyes. Ron sat down next to Seamus Finnegan and immediately began a conversation.

The door behind the desk opened, and a tall, dark-haired woman with a pointed face strode into the room. She rapped her wand on the desk and immediately the class was quiet. Her cold grey eyes quickly rested on Harry, and he felt a chill go down his back.

"Mr. Potter, you've finally decided to join us," Clark said coldly.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I got Malaria..."

"I don't have time to listen to your pathetic excuses," the woman snapped. "Open your textbooks to page thirteen. Today we'll be Vanishing toads."

Clark lectured them for several minutes on the basics of Vanishing, calling often on Slytherins and giving out ridiculous amounts of points for "participation," even when they didn't answer questions correctly. It was a good thing Hermione wasn't there.

Harry knew most of the answers to her questions, but refrained from holding up his hand. Professor Clark was pointedly ignoring the Gryffindors, anyway. The girl next to Neville had raised her hand several times, but finally dropped it in her lap resignedly. At last, Clark flicked her wand and a toad appeared in front of each student. "You may begin practicing. The first student to successfully Vanish their toad will receive twenty points for their House," she said, smiling sickly at the Slytherins.

Harry rolled his eyes. He had mastered Vanishing spells—even up to Vanishing large objects such as desks and chairs—in his fifth year, though he was probably rusty. He rolled up his sleeves, pulled out his wand, and thought carefully through the incantation and wand movements. He could almost hear Hermione's voice in his head, reciting the proper technique. She had gone over this multiple times with him and Ron before their O.W.L.'s. "*Evanesco*," he murmured, tapping his toad.

The spell didn't work correctly the first time. "Finite Incantatem," Harry said, frowning as half of the toad re-appeared. It croaked and tried to hop away, but Harry quickly muttered, "Impedimenta," and it stopped.

"*Evanesco*," he tried again, and this time it worked. Feeling pleased, he looked around to see how his classmates were doing.

Not so well, it turned out. Parvati's toad had turned purple, Lavendar's toad had sprouted wings, and Neville's toad hadn't changed a bit. Next to him, Jeremy's face was screwed up in concentration. "*Evanesco. Evanescio!*" he said, biting his lip in concentration. The toad merely blinked.

Harry sighed. One quick glance at the Slytherins showed that they were doing much better. No one had managed to Vanish their toads, but several of the toads were missing limbs. He turned back to Jeremy. "Mate, you're doing it wrong."

"Huh?"

"I said, you're..."

"I heard what you said," Jeremy hissed. "How would you know?"

Harry shrugged, his face reddening. "Sorry, just thought I could help. You're flourishing your wand too much. Just do one tap on the toad, and say the spell firmly. Don't try to wave your wand over it."

Jeremy stared at him for a few seconds, then turned back to his desk. "Evanescio," he said, concentrating. His toad croaked, and three of the legs disappeared.

Harry grinned. "Awesome," he said, tapping the toad and muttering the counter-spell. "Do it again."

Jeremy was still staring at his toad, his mouth gaping open. "How'd you do that?"

"Just followed the instructions."

"But what about..." Jeremy looked over at Harry's desk. "Your toad's gone."

Harry could feel his face turning even redder. "I, uh, yeah, it wasn't too hard."

Suddenly he heard a rustle of robes, and a second later, Clark was standing over them, her hands on her hips. "Five points from Gryffindor for unnecessary talking."

Harry opened his mouth to object, but Jeremy got there first. "But Harry's Vanished his toad!"

Professor Clark's eyebrows shot up as she surveyed Harry's desk. "Mr. Potter actually achieved a successful Vanish?" she said skeptically.

"Actually, I did, Professor," Harry said, sitting up straighter, and meeting her eyes. In his peripheral vision, he could see heads turning, Gryffindors and Slytherins alike listening in on the conversation.

"I don't believe you," she snapped. "You probably hid your toad somewhere so you could claim you were the first."

"I did not!" Harry cried, outraged.

Clark smirked at him. "Ten points from Gryffindor for lying..."

"No, wait," he said quickly. "I'll prove it." He raised his wand and a moment later the toad had reappeared on his desk. "Evanescio," Harry said again, tapping his wand firmly on the toad. It disappeared.

There was a scattering of applause from the Gryffindors, and a chorus of boo's from the Slytherins. Clark's mouth was a thin line. "Very well," she said stiffly. "Twenty points to Gryffindor."

She turned to stalk away, but Jeremy jumped up. "What about the points you took away? He didn't deserve that."

Clark turned slowly, her eyes cold. "Are you contradicting a teacher, Mr. Javan?"

"No, ma'am," he said quickly, looking down. "But you said he was lying, and he didn't lie."

She regarded him for a few moments, then said, "Ten points back to Gryffindor. Mr. Potter, if I might have a word after class."

Jeremy quickly sat, and Harry flashed a grin at him. At least Jeremy had saved ten of the fifteen points she'd taken away.

"What are you looking at?" Clark barked at the rest of the class. "Back to your work!"

“Clark told me I have to make up all the work I missed,” Harry said angrily as he caught up with Leila in between classes.

“Didn’t you tell her McGonagall excused you?” Leila said, shifting her bag to the other shoulder and wincing slightly.

“I can make that lighter for you,” Harry offered, and pulled out his wand.

“No! Don’t!” she said quickly, pushing his wand away. “You’ll get in trouble.”

Harry looked at her, confused. “For casting a Feather-Light Charm on your bag?”

“For using your wand in the hallway. It’s strictly forbidden. You can get suspended.”

“But... Oh, never mind. This school’s gone mad,” Harry muttered. “Do you know what we learned in class today? *Vanishing Spells!* I learned those in O.W.L. year.”

Leila sighed. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you. So, did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Tell Clark what McGonagall said,” she reminded him impatiently.

“Of course I did,” he said angrily. “And she wouldn’t listen. She said she was teaching the class, not McGonagall, and if I wanted to pass, I’d have to do the homework.”

“Go to the Headmistress.”

“No,” Harry said firmly. “I’m not going to run to McGonagall. I bet that’s exactly what Clark wants me to do.”

“But the homework...”

“I’ll manage,” he said tightly. “I already know the stuff, so it won’t take too long. All I’ve got is Defence after lunch, then I’ll be free the rest of

the afternoon and evening to work on the essays. And the next Transfiguration class isn't till Wednesday."

"I still wish you'd talk to McGonagall, but it's your choice," Leila said, stopping by the Charms classroom. "I've got Charms now, what do you have?"

"No idea," Harry said honestly. He dug around in his bag. "Herbology," he told her. "I'll see you at lunch, OK?"

"Right."

"Mr. Finnigan, tell me the reason behind nonverbal spells," Moody barked later that afternoon. Harry was again sitting next to Jeremy, but now they were in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Seamus looked positively terrified. "Um...so no one can hear the spell you're doing?" he said timidly.

"Partially correct," Moody said, his magical eye spinning wildly. "Ms. Brown?"

"They're more powerful?" Lavender guessed.

"Wrong," Moody snapped. "Ms. Greengrass?"

Harry turned around to look at the petite girl with golden hair sitting next to Neville again. *Daphne. I think her name is Daphne. But that can't be right, I'm sure she was in Slytherin in the other reality.*

"Element of surprise?" she said hesitantly.

"Correct." Moody looked pleased. "Why must you have this element of surprise? Mr. Potter."

"A few seconds' advantage could save your life," Harry said promptly. "With a nonverbal spell, your opponent doesn't know what's coming until it hits him."

“Finally someone who knows their stuff,” Moody growled, shooting Harry a rare smile. “Nonverbal spells are very hard to master. We’ll be splitting up into groups and practicing. One of you will try to nonverbally disarm your opponent, the other will be nonverbally defending himself.”

Harry and Jeremy quickly picked up their bags and waited while Moody cleared away the desks with a flick of his wand. Moody began dividing the Gryffindors into pairs. “Brown, with Finnigan. Longbottom, over here with Patil.” Harry listened absent-mindedly, wondering if he could still conjure a Shield without speaking the spell. “Javan and Greengrass,” Moody growled, and Jeremy glanced at Harry and shrugged apologetically before walking over to Daphne. “Potter, over here with Weasley,” Moody said finally.

Harry looked up, startled. Across the room, Ron was shooting daggers at him with his eyes. *If looks could kill, I’d sure be dead*, Harry thought as he dragged his feet closer to Ron. They stopped, about ten feet apart.

“You may begin,” Moody said loudly. “Those on the right will be blocking.”

Harry was in the offence group. He pointed his wand at Ron, and mentally reviewed all the spells he could use. *Expelliarmus*, he thought forcibly, and to his surprise, a jet of blue light flew out of the end of his wand.

“Protego!” Ron yelled just before the blue disarming spell hit him, and the spell glanced off the side of his shield.

“Hey, that’s cheating,” Harry began angrily, but he was interrupted by Moody.

“Potter, can I see that again?”

Harry turned toward his teacher. “What? The spell?”

Moody nodded, and Harry shrugged. “Sure, if you want.”

“Not at me,” Ron called furiously, and moved out of the line of fire.

“Try it on me,” the old Auror suggested, and he moved across the room. “Go.”

Expelliarmus, Harry thought, and the spell flew towards Moody who intercepted it with his wand. He lowered his wand, looking strangely at Harry.

“Very nice, Potter. Can you do the Impedimenta spell as well?”

Harry showed him.

“And the Stunning Charm?”

Stupefy, Harry thought, and was pleased to see a jet of red light fly out of his wand.

“What about simple hexes?”

Harry demonstrated the Tickling Charm, Slicing Curse, and the Stinging Hex.

Moody nodded in approval, his eyes glinting. “What about your shield? *Stupefy!*” the Auror suddenly shouted, and Harry reacted immediately, throwing up a shield with the Protego spell. The spell ricocheted the shield and knocked a hole in the wall behind Moody.

Moody sent several other spells his way, some of them nonverbal, and Harry shielded himself from each one. Finally Moody slipped his wand back into his holster and fixed a intimidating glare on Harry. “Potter, a word with you in private, if I might.”

Author’s Note: I really didn’t mean to portray a Super!Harry or Smart!Harry, this is just honestly how I think he’d be doing in his classes in this world, with the lowered curriculum standards and such. Besides... It’s all part of the master plot... evil laugh

Chapter 29

“Potter, a word with you in private, if I might.”

Harry followed Moody across the classroom. Moody paused at the door and looked back at the class, most of whom were watching them interestedly. “Back to your practice! Weasley, you can work with Brown and Finnigan.”

Mad-Eye’s office was very similar to the office of Barty Crouch, Jr.’s when he had pretended to be Moody for a whole year under Polyjuice Potion. Harry felt uneasy, remembering painful memories of the aftermath of the Third Task. He hesitated in the doorway, feeling Moody’s magical eye on him even though the Auror’s back was turned.

“Have a seat,” Moody growled. “I won’t bite.”

Harry managed a forced laugh, but his stomach was still in knots as he perched himself on a stool.

“Those were impressive spells you demonstrated out there,” Mad-Eye began, clunking around the room, his back turned. Harry knew he was still being watched with the magical eye. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but said nothing.

Moody turned suddenly, both eyes boring into Harry, his wand in his hand. “You’re not the boy I taught last year. Who are you?”

Harry gulped. “H-Harry P-Potter,” he insisted.

Moody took two steps closer. “The Harry Potter I taught last year wasn’t even remotely capable of the extraordinarily performed Defence spells I saw out there. Potter couldn’t possibly become an Animagus in two months, or successfully rescue a prisoner from Azkaban. You’re not Potter. Who are you?”

Harry clutched the edges of the stool. “I...”

Moody shook a little bottle in his face. "Do you know what this is?" he growled.

Harry focused on the bottle. "V-Veritiserum, sir?"

"As an Auror, I demand to know who you are," Moody barked, his wand drawn. "If you will not tell me, I will administer the Truth Potion."

"I'm Harry Potter!" Harry said, now trembling. "I swear!"

Moody snorted.

"You can try Veritiserum if you like," Harry said, taking a risk. "I'll tell you the same thing."

"If you are Harry Potter, then give a reasonable explanation for your sudden capabilities," Moody commanded, his good eye flashing, the magical eye spinning wildly in its socket.

Harry swallowed hard, but knew there was no way to get out of this one without some of the truth coming out. Squaring his shoulders, he looked the Auror in the eyes and said, "I'm from an Aperio."

Moody looked shocked for only a moment, then his Auror-front was back. "When."

"When?"

"When did it happen?"

"The first day of summer," Harry whispered.

"Who are the other two participants?"

"Lupin."

"And?"

"The identity of the third is unknown, sir."

Moody's eyebrows shot up. "What was the reason for the Aperio?"

“Sorry?”

“What wish did you and Lupin both have that brought you into this reality?”

“We wished that my parents had not been killed by Voldemort.”

A long period of silence indicated that Moody was thinking this over.
“And what event of importance took place to cause their deaths in the other reality?”

“A prophecy, sir.”

“Of what nature?”

“A prophecy regarding me and... and Voldemort, sir.”

Another pause.

“Its contents?”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives,” Harry recited.

Moody swore under his breath. “That complicates things, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Voldemort killed your parents?”

“Yes. My mother leapt in front of me, and when he tried to kill me, the curse rebounded and would have killed him if it hadn’t been for the Horcruxes.”

“I suppose that matches up with the part about him marking you as his equal.”

“Yes, sir. I had a scar from his attack. He also duelled me in my fourth year.”

The Auror's eyebrows shot up. "Who won?"

"I did."

Moody stared into his Foe Glass for a long time, then looked back at Harry. "Give me a reason why I should believe you."

"The Horcruxes, sir," Harry said promptly. "I learned that information from Dumbledore himself."

"Dumbledore was alive?"

Harry swallowed again. "Until last June, sir."

"How did he die?"

"Snape killed him."

"*Snape?*"

"Yes, sir. He was a Hogwarts Professor."

Moody sighed, and took a seat across from Harry. "I see. Very well. How did Lupin acquire the Diary? I was among the team of Aurors who searched the school, and we found nothing, yet he claims to have found it here."

"It was in the Chamber of Secrets."

This merited a reaction. Moody jerked a little, but quickly recovered. "And how did he know where the entrance was?"

"I told him. I'm a Parselmouth. I opened the Chamber and Lupin, McGonagall, and I went down and retrieved Riddle's diary."

"How did you know the location of its entrance?"

"In my second year, Lucius Malfoy gave the diary to Ginny Weasley, but people thought I was the one opening the Chamber when the attacks began. My friends and I figured it out. No one was killed, only Petrified, and when Riddle took Ginny into the Chamber, Ron and I went in and I killed the Basilisk and Riddle."

“Ronald Weasley?”

“Yes, sir.”

Moody tapped his foot on the ground. “That explains the foolish rescue mission,” he said under his breath. “You looked very uneasy when you entered my office. Don’t look surprised, boy, I notice things no one else would. You have bad memories of this place.”

Harry looked down at his hands. “During our fourth year, you came to teach at Hogwarts, sir. We thought it was you, but it was really Barty Crouch, Jr. He imprisoned you in your magical trunk and took Polyjuice all year long. It was the Triwizard Tournament, and he Confunded the Cup and entered my name. During the last Task, he made the Triwizard Cup into a Portkey. When I touched the Portkey, it took me to a graveyard where Voldemort used my blood to resurrect himself. I escaped, and when I got back, Crouch tried to kill me. Dumbledore got here just in time and used Veritiserum to make Crouch tell the truth.”

“I see,” Moody said, after a long pause. “I apologize, Potter, for threatening you with Veritiserum. I first thought you might be a Death Eater in disguise, but not even a Death Eater is stupid enough to throw around spells normal students don’t know, or willingly let himself get locked up in Azkaban.”

Harry felt a grin spreading over his face.

“But I will advise you to be very cautious. If you do as well in other classes as you do in mine, your cover will quickly be blown. Constant vigilance, and don’t get cocky simply because your skills are greater than other students’ abilities.”

“No, sir. You won’t tell anyone, will you?” Harry asked worriedly.

“No, Mr. Potter, you have my word of honor. Your secret is safe.”

“Thanks.”

Moody stood. “Class is nearly over. You first.”

Harry slipped off the stool and made for the door. "I would be very interested to hear more of the other reality at another time," Moody said as Harry turned the doorknob.

"Yes, sir."

The class was still practicing the spells. It looked as if several people had been successful. Neville was now frozen while Daphne frantically looked for the counter spell for the Impedimenta Charm in her textbook. Seamus had conjured a nice blue shield around him, and was trying to get everyone else to look at it.

"Detention, Potter," Moody said quietly as he clunked into the room behind Harry. "Wednesday night."

Harry spun around, his mouth open, but the edges of Moody's mouth were curling upward. The Auror winked at him.

Harry nodded and grinned back, then picked up his bag and headed for the door.

"He gave you *detention*?" Jeremy bellowed, pounding his fist on the table. Harry's ink bottle spilled all over the Transfiguration essay he was trying to finish.

Harry bit back a few choice words, and quickly muttered a cleaning spell. The ink disappeared off his paper. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Why'd he give you detention?" the other boy demanded.

"For being a bloody know-it-all," Harry said lightly. "Can I get back to my essay now?"

"He's as bad as Clark," Jeremy muttered as he returned to his own Transfiguration homework.

Harry was on his second essay—fortunately the Transfiguration class had only been assigned three during Harry's absence—and he was halfway finished with it. It was seven in the evening, and the Common

Room was noisy. He didn't mind the commotion; for some reason he studied better with noise.

"Right. The proper wand movements and nonverbal accompanying incantations for Vanishing reptiles," he muttered, and dipped his quill into the ink bottle.

A few minutes later, Jeremy threw his book down. "I can't study anymore," he said. "I'm going for a fly."

Harry nodded absent-mindedly, scratching out a sentence he'd just written. Only seconds after Jeremy had left, Leila slipped into his deserted seat.

"Harry. Harry!"

Harry looked up. "What?" he said irritably.

"Tell me the truth. Why'd you get that detention?"

Harry gave her a lopsided grin. "Honestly? I have no idea." He sobered. "I told Moody the truth."

A soft gasp. "You did?"

"I had no choice, Leila. I got all the spells right on the first try in Defence Class. He wanted to know why. If I refused, he would've used Veritiserum on me."

"Veriti-what?"

"Truth Serum. Makes you tell the truth."

Her mouth formed an O. "Maybe he wants to know more."

"About the Aperio?"

"About the other reality."

"That could be it," Harry said, frowning down at his essay.

Leila stared over at the fire for a few moments. "I know," she said suddenly. "I'll bet he's going to teach you some more advanced spells and just needs an excuse to get you to his office."

Harry sat up. "Yeah," he said, raking his fingers through his hair. "You know, Leila, I wouldn't be surprised if you're right!"

She smirked. "You can pay me later."

He swatted, but missed. "My brilliant sister. Too bad she's the biggest prat in Britian."

Now Harry was the one ducking for cover.

"Why are you studying so hard?" Leila said after she had successfully landed a few blows on his arms and head.

"Clark made me make up the work, remember? Plus I've got a Herbology essay. And Quidditch Tryouts are tomorrow, so I won't have time Tuesday night."

Leila sighed exasperatedly. "Harry. The surest way to blow your cover is to do exactly what you're doing now."

Harry looked at her, confused. "What?"

"Study. You *never* study!"

"I don't?"

"No."

"Oh. So I should stop studying."

"No, that's not what I meant!"

"That's what it sounded like."

"Git."

"Prat."

“Idiot.”

“Moron.”

“Dingbat.”

“Hippogriff.” This lead into a duel of insults derived from both Wizarding and Muggle animal names. When Harry felt he’d had quite enough, he crossed his arms sourly and said, “So what should I do? Pick my nose and stare blankly into the fire? Go hex a few Slytherins because I’m bored?”

“No.” Leila covered her face for a few moments. Harry couldn’t decide if she was crying, or simply trying to gain control. The latter was correct. Leila finally removed her hands from her eyes. “All I’m trying to say, Harry, is that you shouldn’t study so much in public. People are going to think you’ve gone bonkers. Harry Potter, *bookworm*?”

“I don’t plan on being engrossed in these oh-so-fascinating books any longer than I have to,” he informed her dryly.

“You’re incorrigible,” she informed him.

“You’re hopelessly annoying,” Harry retaliated.

“Merlin’s Beard,” she muttered. “I’m leaving before you make me hex you.”

The candles in the Common Room were going out one by one. Harry looked at his watch (another of his birthday presents) and sighed. It was almost ten. He was finally done with his Herbology essay, which had taken him much longer than he’d expected, even though it was about the magical properties of Fanged Geraniums, a plant he’d studied two years previously.

Harry gathered up his books and shoved them in his bag. He yawned. *Good thing I’m not on Prefect Duties tonight.*

There were only a few people left in the Common Room. Most of the Gryffindors had gone to bed. Several third years were chatting over in

the corner, four haggard fifth years were frantically scribbling essays at a table in the corner, and a couple of sixth years were snogging in the chair in front of the fireplace.

Harry hoisted his bag up onto his shoulder and was ready to head up the stairs when something caught his attention. The portrait hole was opening.

A tall boy stepped through, shutting the painting behind him. He turned and strode toward the stairs to the dormitory, but suddenly stopped when Harry met his eyes.

Harry quickly made up his mind. It was now or never. He dropped his bag next to the staircase. "Ron," he said, closing the gap. "Can I have a word with you?"

Ron glared at him. "Why?"

"Nothing much. See?" Harry held out his hands. "No wand. I left it in my bag."

Ron looked as if he'd rather face an Acromantula than be forced to talk to Harry, but finally he gave a tiny nod.

"Outside?" Harry asked.

"Make it quick," Ron snapped.

Harry led the way toward the Portrait Hole. "Where are you going?" the fat lady said irritably as she swung open.

"Nowhere," Harry told her, and he looked back to see if Ron was coming. He was, but very hesitantly.

"Ron, I won't mince words," Harry said quickly once Ron was through the Portrait Hole. "I want you to try out for Keeper tomorrow night."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Keeper? Why? You're the Keeper." His voice grew darker. "You want me to come try out so you and all your friends can laugh at how stupid I look."

"No, no! It isn't that way at all," Harry protested. "I need you as Keeper. I'm... I... Er... I can't play Keeper."

"Why not?" Ron said suspiciously.

"I just can't," Harry said. "The reason's not important, but I just can't. That's why I need you."

Ron laughed harshly. "Funny Quidditch team that'll make. Seven players and one Captain who sits on the ground and yells orders."

Harry clenched his fists, but controlled his voice. "I'm just going to play a different position, that's all."

"Which position?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Seeker."

"*Seeker?*"

"Seeker. I practiced over the summer. We don't have a Seeker for the team."

"Why are you asking me to be Keeper?" Ron said, still looking doubtfully at Harry.

"Your brothers told me you were decent," Harry said.

Ron looked away. "Oh."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "That's all I wanted to ask you. We need you on the team, Ron."

Ron didn't say anything, so Harry moved back toward the Portrait Hole. "Jupiter's moon," he told the Fat Lady, who grumbled about the time as she swung open.

"Potter."

Harry turned. "Yeah?"

"About... about Ginny," Ron said awkwardly, then paused, swallowing hard. Harry waited. "I just want to say, thanks."

"Don't mention it," Harry said firmly. "I have one more thing to tell you too." He paused, looked Ron straight in the eye, and grinned maniacally. "You'd better watch your back, 'cause Jeremy and I are going to make you pay for the Love Potions."

Harry was sure he caught a glimmer of a smile on Ron's face before he stepped back through the Portrait Hole.

Author's Note: For those of you who were afraid that Ron and Harry were going to hate each other all the way through the story...no, not the case! lol. I like the trio's relationships too much to simply destroy the friendship for good in a new reality.

The chapters are going to be averaging 1500-2500 words all the way through... (though I'm trying desperately to keep it closer to 2500 now, and I think I've been doing a bit better) and **for those of you who don't like short chapters, I'm sorry**. It's just much easier for me to write the story this way, so if you can't stand it, go check out my C2 and find some other cool stories to read. I've put all the best AU/time-travel/alternate reality stories I've found in the C2, plus anything else I read that I found particularly funny/good/interesting. And many of them have longer chapters.

I'm posting these chapters really often because I don't like being so far ahead in the writing than you guys are in the reading. I'm writing the end of chapter 35 right now—I know some people always wait a week in between posting chapters in order to get as many reviews as possible, but I don't really care about that, so I'm going to post one a day (if I'm here) until I catch up with myself. I'd rather you guys be waiting on me to write the next chapter rather than waiting on me to *post* the next chapter.

Anyway, expect the third person in the Aperio to be revealed in about chapter 40. That's how it looks, anyway, right now. And thanks for the reviews, and thanks for all the people who have been beta-ing for me, (Diana and Andy, I think) and for the offers. And sorry about this enormously long author's note.

Two days, ten hours, and nineteen minutes here in Tennessee until the end of the world...A.K.A., Deathly Hallows.

Chapter 30

To Harry's relief, only Gryffindors showed up for tryouts the next day, and for the most part, those who showed up looked serious about trying out. There were definite advantages to the new reality, one of them being a profound sense of normality Harry had never before experienced. Girls weren't drooling over him, heads didn't turn as he walked down the hallways between classes, he didn't have people obsessively staring at his forehead, and large numbers of fans didn't show up for Quidditch tryouts simply because Harry was captain.

"Settle down, everyone!" Harry called, trying to make himself heard over the tumult. "Sonorus," he muttered, pointing his wand at his throat. "Hey! Everybody quiet!"

The desired effect was immediate. The students closest to him covered their ears and winced, but now he had their attention.

"That's better. I'd like to thank you all for coming," Harry began. "We'll begin by dividing up into groups of ten and flying laps around the field. Now, you in the front, you ten, mount your brooms..."

Soon the first years and inexperienced flyers had been eliminated. They left the pitch cheerfully; only a few stayed in the stands to watch.

"Chasers, Chasers over here," Harry called. "Anyone who is trying out for Chaser, please step this way! This includes returning Chasers," he added as an afterthought. Demelza Robins and Leila joined the group, the latter scowling at Harry.

"Right. We'll start with groups of three, and you can try to get the Quaffle through the goals. I'll play Keeper, but I'll go pretty easy on you. I'll be watching to see how well you fly, throw, maneuver, and work as a team to get the Quaffle in."

Harry motioned to the first three people to mount their brooms, and tossed a petite girl the Quaffle to start. Then he flew up to the goal post.

The Chaser tryouts went quickly. Thanks to his sister's summer instruction, Harry was able to block most of the goals, with the exception of Leila's and Demelza's shots. He quickly picked out a skinny third year boy with an exceptional aim. Ivan Schuyler became the third Chaser, and Stella Moore, a petite fourth year girl who showed promise, was chosen as Reserve Chaser.

"OK, next up, Beaters!" Harry shouted, and about ten students stepped forward, including Jeremy Javan. To Harry's surprise, there were a couple girls in the group.

"Split up in pairs and grab some bats," Harry instructed. "Leila, Demelza, you're going to play Chasers from opposite teams. I want one Beater defending Leila, and the other defending Demelza."

"You're going to get us killed!" Demelza squeaked at Harry.

He waved her concern away. "You'll be fine if you fly like you just did. But if it will make you feel better..." Harry waved his wand and muttered the Unbreakable Spell for people. "There. This will keep you safe from Bludgers for twenty minutes. Even if one hits you, you won't get hurt. Do you want one too?" he asked, looking at Leila.

"If Jeremy's trying out, yes," she said cheerfully, stepping closer so Harry could administer the spell.

"OK, Kirke, you're on Leila's team, Javan, you're with Demelza," Harry called, as the first pair of Beaters stepped up.

Jeremy was an excellent Beater, Harry discovered. He was excellent at judging where the target was going to be before he hit the Bludger. Leila had quite a time dodging his Bludgers. She swooped and dived, dodged and ducked, but she only scored one goal under Jeremy's onslaught. Andrew Kirke trying valiantly to defend her, but he was no match for Jeremy.

"Enough!" Harry shouted at the end of five minutes. The two Beaters flew down, and another two took their place.

To Harry's surprise, the second-best Beater turned out to be a wiry fifth year named Anita Johnson. "Not of any relation to Angelina, are you?" Harry asked her after telling her she had made the team.

"She's my older sister," the girl said, beaming. "I can't wait to tell her the news—*Quidditch Through the Ages* says that there hasn't been a female Beater at Hogwarts since the 1970s."

"You deserve it," Harry said, grinning. "OK, next up, Keeper tryouts!"

There was a murmur in the crowd of waiting people. One girl raised her hand timidly. "Don't you mean, *Reserve* Keeper tryouts?" she asked.

"Actually, I'm looking for a new Keeper," Harry informed them. Jeremy had flown closer along with Demelza and both were wearing shocked expressions on their faces.

"You're not playing Keeper?" Demelza said incredulously.

"You're the best! You've played Keeper for three years! What are you thinking?" Jeremy said furiously.

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm trying out for Seeker," he said.

"Seeker?"

"You're crazy!"

"We'll loose for sure!"

"Slytherin will get the cup again and it will be *your* fault!"

"ENOUGH!"

Harry spun around. Leila was standing behind him, glaring at Jeremy and Demelza, her hands on her hips. "Harry's a great Seeker," she declared. "I watched him play this summer. He's a better Seeker than he is a Keeper."

"We need a better Seeker this year if we want to win anything," Harry said, focusing on Jeremy and trying to stay calm. "I'll tell you what.

You and Demelza can be the judges for the Seeker trials. If I catch the Snitch first, can I be Seeker?"

Jeremy and Demelza looked at each other. Ivan, Stella, and Anita had edged closer, and they were listening intently. "I guess so," Jeremy finally said. "It's only fair."

"Right, then. Seekers, step forward," Harry called to the remaining people. There were only three other students trying out for the position. "This trial's pretty simple," Harry informed them. "We'll all look for the Snitch. No fouling, tailing, or cheating. The first person to find the Snitch becomes Seeker. Understand?"

They nodded their heads in consent, and Harry released the Snitch. After a few moments had passed, he nodded to them.

Harry mounted his broom and soared up, followed by the other Seekers. He quickly gained altitude and circled the pitch far above the others. It was a glorious evening. In the distance the sun was setting, gold and pink over the lake. *Snitch*, Harry thought firmly to himself. *Must concentrate on the Snitch.*

He looked down at the scene below. On the ground, Leila, Jeremy, and the rest of the Gryffindor team along with the spectators were watching him closely. Twenty feet below, the two boys who were trying out for Seeker were darting here and there, first at one goal, then at the other. They looked as if they were playing an impossible game of Hide and Seek with invisible playmates.

The girl, on the other hand, had followed Harry's example and was circling the pitch, high above the stands. Harry studied her; she looked familiar, then a name came to his head. *Natalie MacDonald. Fourth year, isn't she?* Harry kept one eye on her. She looked like she might know what she was doing.

He circled again, searching desperately for the glint of gold. At last, he spotted it. The Snitch was lingering near the ground at the far goal post. Natalie was closer...much closer... but she hadn't spotted it yet. She was losing altitude, though, slowly flying lower and lower.

Harry pulled his broom around and began flying back and forth, edging closer and closer. He tried to look casual, looking up and down the pitch as if he were still searching. He was almost above the Snitch...

Then Natalie accelerated.

Harry pulled his broom around quickly and sped up. *Faster, faster*, he urged his Firebolt. He wasn't going to make it... He still had too much altitude. He was flying directly above Natalie now. She was too close to the Snitch...

With one last urge his broom shot forward and Harry dove. He spiraled downward toward the field, toward the Snitch, narrowly missing Natalie who braked just in time to avoid a crash. "Hey!" he heard her shout angrily, but a moment later she was hot on his tail.

Harry's Firebolt was pointed almost directly downward now. The ground was rushing closer and closer, the Snitch dancing back and forth, as if tempting Harry to catch it. Vaguely Harry heard cries of fear as he plummeted towards the field, his broom going faster and faster... But he felt no fear. He had a Firebolt now. At the last possible second, Harry pulled out of the dive, and shot upwards again, feeling a rush of giddy excitement as his fingers closed around the cool Snitch.

There was a roar of approval as Harry flew over to the spectators, the Snitch raised victoriously. He landed, and Natalie landed next to him a second later, followed by the two boys who slunk off into the crowd.

"Good game," Natalie said, smiling and holding out her hand.

"Thanks," Harry said, grinning back. "You'll be Reserve Seeker, won't you?"

Her face lit up. "Reserve Seeker? Yeah! Maybe with some practice I can get as good as you."

Harry laughed. "You're nearly there," he said. "You were really good."

She blushed, and opened her mouth to reply, but was cut off by Jeremy, Demelza, and Leila.

"That was incredible, Harry!" Jeremy said gleefully, pounding Harry on the back.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Demelza asked, her eyes shining.

"I practiced over the summer," Harry said.

"Liar," Leila muttered under her breath. Harry ignored her.

"With you as Seeker, the Slytherins won't have a chance at the cup," Jeremy said confidently.

"But who're we going to get for Keeper?" Demelza said, frowning.

Harry shrugged. "Well, who do we have here? Hey," he called, "all Keepers, over here!"

About seven students stepped forward, and Harry was pleased to see Ron Weasley lurking in the back. He shot the red head an encouraging smile.

"OK. I'm going to let Ivan and Stella try to put goals past you, one by one. You there, you're first."

Harry felt relieved as he watched the first four Keeper trials. The first boy missed every goal. The second saved one, the third winced every time the Quaffle came near, and the fourth actually fell off his broom when the Quaffle hit him in the stomach. "Turner, you're up next," Harry told a sixth year girl with blond hair. She flew pretty well, saving three goals out of four, and Harry shot her an encouraging smile as she landed.

"Weasley," he called, and Ron stepped forward and mounted his broom. Harry held his breath as Ron flew up to the goal post. Ivan and Stella began their assault.

But he needn't have worried at all. If anything at all, Ron was a better Keeper now than he'd ever been in the other reality. He didn't miss one goal.

"Excellent!" Harry shouted as Ron landed again, a flustered smile on his face. "That was really great! OK, who's last?"

The last Keeper was a stringy boy who only saved two goals. "I guess that settles it," Harry told Ron who was standing nearby. "You're Keeper."

Ron's ears turned red, and he managed to mumble his thanks before Harry turned to talk to the girl who'd saved four goals. "I'd like you to be Reserve Keeper," he told the girl.

"Her name is Kady," Leila said from behind him.

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "I, er, have a bad time remembering names. So, will you do it?"

"I suppose so," she said. "I mean, if you need me. Ron's really good, though..."

"And he's also a seventh year," Harry pointed out. "They'll need you next year, so this year you can practice a lot, and fill in if we need you for a game."

Stella raised her hand timidly. "When are our practices?"

"Good question. Gryffindor team, gather around," Harry called. "All the rest of you can leave."

When the only ones left were teammates, Harry looked around at them and said, "Welcome to the Gryffindor Quidditch team!"

Several people cheered.

"We'll hold practices two times a week, first on Tuesday nights, then once more on Saturdays or Sundays. I'll let you all know once I check the schedule. Now, about uniforms..."

After a few more minutes, the team broke up, talking excitedly about the upcoming season as they headed back up to the castle.

"That went really well," Demelza remarked as she, Harry, Leila, and Jeremy climbed the steps to the second floor. "You're a natural captain, Harry. It was almost like you'd done it before."

Leila snickered. Harry glared at her, and she quickly turned her laugh into a cough and dropped back a few paces to regain her composure. "Yeah, Harry's a great captain," she shot back after a moment. "He's had tons of practice, ordering me around ever since I was born."

Jeremy and Demelza found this very funny.

"I'm not that bad," Harry protested as they headed up another staircase. "It's always you ordering me around." He shot her a meaningful glance and lowered his voice so only she could hear. "Do the words, *don't do your homework*, ring a bell?"

"Shut up," she snapped back. "You boss me around all the time at home."

"I never..."

"You did, you just don't *remember* it," she said, giving him a significant look.

Harry sighed. He'd never win this argument; he had no memories to confront her with. Deciding to let it go, he said, "Last one to the portrait hole is a Pixie Puff!"

Author's Note: There you go, the next chapter. It hasn't been betaed, so I'll update it as soon as I hear from my betas. I'll probably (and I'm not making any promises) post chapter 31 tomorrow, and then take a break for a few days to read *Deathly Hallows*. I mean, honestly, who of you are going to care anything about my story when you've got the real thing to read? Oh, one more thing; you may wonder why I've given the team so many reserves. It's because the team will need reserves. Later on.

Here are my predictions...

Live: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, the Twins, McGonagall, Neville, Tonks, Bill, and Fleur.

Die: Voldemort, Draco and his family, Snape, Bellatrix (Neville will kill her), Pettigrew (after repaying his debt), Luna, Lupin, Charlie, Percy (after doing something heroic), and Hagrid. And most of the Death Eaters. And the Minister of Magic—I hope... Arthur Weasley for Minister!!!!!!

Snape is good. Dumbledore planned his death. Nagini will become Harry's new pet—I really don't think she's a Horcrux, but Dumbledore's hardly ever wrong. Snape liked Lily while they were at Hogwarts. Ron and Hermione will get together. RAB is Regulus Black. (But we all knew that, huh?) Harry, Ron, and Hermione will not get the Order's help hunting Horcruxes, nor will Ginny go with them. They will go to the Burrow, stay for Bill's wedding, then sneak away in the middle of the night.

That is all. Happy reading!

Chapter 31

Wednesday morning dawned clear and sunny, but Harry groaned as he rolled out of bed. Today he had Transfiguration with Clark right after breakfast.

"What crawled up your robes and died?" Leila asked as Harry sat down next to her in the Great Hall.

"Transfiguration," Harry said glumly.

Leila nodded sympathetically. "Clark does that to you."

"She's horrible. Every bit as bad as Snape."

"Who? Oh, that Death Eater, the one who killed Dumbledore?"

"Yeah. Don't talk so loud."

"Sorry." Leila shoveled a fork-full of scrambled eggs into her mouth, chewed, then swallowed. "Do you know what happened to him?"

"Who?"

"The Death Eater who killed Dumbledore," she said impatiently. "Weren't you listening to me?"

"You mean Snape?"

"Yes."

"No idea where he is. Honestly, I don't care. Do you know where he is?"

"Nope. I've heard Mum and Dad talk about him once or twice, but it's usually in reference to their school years."

"He's probably with the Death Eaters right now, doing Voldemort's dirty work for him," Harry said bitterly, stabbing viciously at a piece of bacon.

Leila chewed thoughtfully on her piece of toast for a few moments. "Hey, Harry," she said suddenly. "Who's that with McGonagall?"

"Where?" he said, looking up, but her reply was cut off by McGonagall's voice.

"Attention! Students of Hogwarts," McGonagall called, her wand to her throat. "Quiet, please! Many of you have wondered who our flying instructor and Quidditch referee will be. As she announced at the end of last year, Madam Hooch has retired. One of my former students has agreed to take the position. It is my pleasure to introduce, Professor Sirius Black!"

Sirius stepped into view as most of the Gryffindors and a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs erupted into applause and cheers. Sirius grinned and waved, winking when he caught Harry's eye. "Later," he mouthed, and Harry nodded.

"It's going to be awesome having Sirius here," Leila said cheerfully as she and Harry climbed the stairs to the Common Room a few minutes later. "At least he won't put us in detention when he catches us doing something wrong like Mum did."

Harry paused. "What do you mean, *like Mum did*?"

"You know, when Mum... Oh," she gasped, realising what he meant. "You weren't here. Mum was the Potions teacher during my first and second years."

"Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," Leila said, grinning. "It was alright, and all, though kind of weird having a parent as a teacher. She didn't spare us for being her kids."

"Why'd she quit?"

"Got a better offer from the Institute of Magical Research. She said she'd had enough of teaching, and besides, she'd done her duty, and kept an eye on us during our first couple of years at Hogwarts. Well,

my first couple years at Hogwarts. You were here first year all by yourself, lucky git."

"If you say so," Harry said lightly. "Hey, want to go somewhere this evening?"

Leila cocked an eyebrow suspiciously. "Where?"

"I dunno, the Shrieking Shack, the Forbidden Forrest, the Quidditch Pitch, the Three Broomsticks, I'm not really picky."

"Out of school bounds?" she said incredulously. "Harry! We'll get expelled!"

"Not if we aren't caught," he retorted cheekily. "I'm bored."

"*Bored?* How can you be bored?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "For the last six years of my life I've always had *someone* after my life. I'm almost missing the excitement."

Leila threw up her hands in surrender. "Boys are completely mental," she muttered. "Merlin's beard, Harry. Just because you don't have someone trying to murder you doesn't mean you should go out looking for danger!"

"Not danger," Harry corrected, exasperated. "Just fun."

"Well, my answer is 'no.' I'm not getting expelled for some fun."

"Fine," Harry huffed. "I'll ask Jeremy."

"No, you won't," she said, her voice rising.

He stopped in the corridor and stared at her. "Why not?"

Leila regarded him smugly. "Cause you've got detention with Moody tonight."

Harry idly twirled his quill in his hands. Next to him, Jeremy looked as if he wanted nothing more than to take a nice, long nap. In fact,

several other students looked as if they were being put to sleep by Professor Clark's Transfiguration lecture.

"Amphibians and reptiles are much easier to Vanish than mammals," Clark droned. "Why is this? Parkinson."

"They don't have fur?" Pansy guessed.

Inwardly, Harry groaned. In the other reality, even *Neville* knew the answer to that question.

"Good guess, Ms. Parkinson. Five points to Slytherin. Anyone else? Malfoy."

"The body formation of an amphibian or reptile is much simpler than that of a mammal," Draco Malfoy said in a patronizing drawl.

"Twenty points to Slytherin," Clark said, a cold smile playing across her face. Harry ground his teeth.

"Today we'll be Vanishing reptiles," the Transfiguration professor continued. She tapped her board and it instantly filled with instructions and diagrams. Another flick of her wand, and snakes appeared on all the desks.

Several girls screamed. Clark's eyebrows flew up in annoyance, but she merely said, "You may begin." Harry noticed that this time she didn't offer house points for the first one to complete the Vanishing exercise.

Then he took a good look at his snake, and his heart dropped.

The green snake had raised its head and was staring at him, its black eyes wide. If snakes had a "shocked" look, this was it.

I'm discovered. They're all going to find out I'm a Parselmouth. Harry quickly glanced around. To his horror, other snakes were regarding him, some suspiciously, some with open curiosity. Fortunately none of the students had noticed yet. But sooner or later they were bound to notice that every snake in the room was staring at Harry Potter.

Harry felt panic welling up. If he told the snakes to stop staring at him, his classmates would hear him. If he did nothing at all, they'd still notice. If he left, Clark might get suspicious...

Then an idea struck. He hoped it worked with Parseltongue as well as normal speech, but it was the only solution he had. He quickly drew his wand and murmured, "Muffliato."

"Hey, Jeremy," Harry said, testing the spell to make sure it'd worked. His friend didn't glance up. *Perfect.*

Would you please stop staring at me? I can't let them know I'm a Parselmouth, Harry hissed.

To his relief, the snakes looked away. *Why can we not gaze upon you?* the snake on Jeremy's desk asked, not looking at Harry.

They'll get suspicious if they know I can speak your language, Harry told them, bending his head over his desk. He didn't want anyone to see his lips moving. *They will think I'm a dark wizard.*

That is unintelligent, his snake said primly. *Parseltongue is a noble language. And only a few snakes are evil.*

Never try to understand the complex paradoxes of the humans' minds, Jeremy's snake lectured. Harry bit back a laugh.

I suppose we could say the same about you, he said, chuckling. *I'd love to chat with you all class period, but I've got to work on this spell.*

Whatever, his snake said disdainfully, and turned her head away.

Harry removed the Muffliato spell and began practicing the Evanescio spell. It only took him two times to get it perfect. Jeremy, on the other hand, was having a harder time. Behind him, Neville was sweating profusely.

"Mate, how'd you do those wand movements again?" Jeremy asked, shooting glares at his snake which was still completely visible.

Stupid humans, the snake said to itself. Harry quickly muffled his snicker in his sleeve, before turning to help Jeremy.

Forty minutes later, most of the Gryffindors had achieved the spell, thanks to Harry's help. Clark had left halfway through the class, giving Harry the freedom to move around. Of the Slytherins, only two had successfully Vanished their snakes. Malfoy was shooting daggers at Harry by the end of the class.

Five minutes before the bell rang, Clark appeared again. "You may deposit your snake in this box on my desk before you leave."

Harry muttered the counter-spell again, and his snake appeared. *It was nice meeting you*, she hissed. *Are you finished making me disappear?*

Harry gave a tiny nod.

Well, the best of luck to you, speaker of the noble language of Parseltongue.

Harry scooped his snake up and still grinning, carried her to the box in the front. He suddenly felt someone watching him, and jerked his head up.

Luzita Clark was looking at him, her eyebrows furrowed. Her lips were pursed, and her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Harry gulped. *She noticed something!* he thought frantically. Dumping his snake in the box with the others, he grabbed his bag and books and rushed for the door.

"Merlin, Clark suspects something," he told Leila worriedly as they climbed the stairs after dinner.

Leila's eyebrows shot up. "What'd you do this time?"

"She had us Vanish snakes in class."

"And?"

“Snakes have an uncanny ability to recognize Parselmouths,” Harry explained. “My snake started talking to me, and all the rest of the snakes were gaping at me.”

Leila began to laugh. “I wish I’d been there to see it! Harry Potter, snake charmer.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Yes, it is,” she said, suppressing giggles in her hand. Harry was about to argue with her, when they were overtaken by a tall man with dark hair.

“Hey, Harry, Leila,” Sirius said, pulling Leila into a hug and slapping Harry’s back.

“Sirius!” Leila squealed.

“How are you two doing? Staying in trouble, are you?”

“Harry got detention on Monday,” Leila announced.

Harry sent her a nasty look, but Sirius was delighted. “Way to go, Harry! Who gave it to you?”

“Moody,” Harry said sullenly.

“What’d you do?” Sirius inquired, his eyes sparkling.

“Mouthed him in class,” Harry said, trying to look remorseful.

“Atta boy! Though I must admit to being a little disappointed that neither of you have beaten James’s and my record yet. We were the first students in the history of Hogwarts to get detentions before even being Sorted.”

“What did you do?” Harry asked curiously.

“During the boat ride we pushed Peter into the lake for being a git,” Sirius said, scowling. “We should’ve just left him there.”

Harry really didn't want to get into a Pettigrew-insulting conversation, but that's where their talk seemed to be headed. Leila seemed to sense it too, because she quickly said, "Sirius, you should tell us more about all the stuff you and Dad did when you were at Hogwarts. Mum won't let him talk about it at home in the fear that we'll get ideas."

A mischievous glint crept into Sirius's eyes. "Did they ever tell you how the rule that first years couldn't have brooms got started?" he asked, and the siblings shook their heads. "It was your dad's fault, really. He was bloody brilliant on a broom, and he was showing off for some Ravenclaw girls when he ran into one of the towers and fell off. If it hadn't been for a teacher casting a Slowing Charm on him as he fell, we would've had to scrape him off the pavement. That's when they made the rule."

Harry and Leila exchanged glances and chuckled, and Sirius rounded on them. "Now, you two can't say a word of this to your parents," he said warningly. "Lily will have my head on a platter."

Leila widened her eyes. "Oh, no, we wouldn't dream of telling!" she said in an innocent voice. Harry doubled over laughing.

"Don't lie, Leila," he said, trying to control the laughs that were threatening to bubble over again. "You wouldn't miss this chance to rub something in Dad's face."

Sirius opened his mouth to protest, but Harry cut him off. "Don't worry, I won't let her tell Dad it was you who told us. Besides, there are lots of teachers we could've picked that particular bit of information up from."

Sirius looked a little more relieved. "So, what classes did you guys have today?"

"Transfiguration," Harry said, making a face. "Herbology, and Defence."

"I had Charms and Arithmancy," Leila announced. "We're working on the Aguamenti spell right now."

She chatted with Sirius about classes and homework the rest of the way to the Gryffindor Common Room. Harry gave the password when they reached the Fat Lady, and led the way over to his favourite chairs by the fireplace. Sirius was following slowly, absorbed in looking around at the room.

“It hasn’t changed a bit since I was a student,” he said almost reverently. “Well, except for those curtains over there.”

“What changed about them?” Leila inquired.

“They were replaced after James set them on fire in our third year. He didn’t mean to, of course, he was aiming for your mum’s textbook...”

This, of course, led into another round of reminiscent story telling. Finally the conversation wound down and Harry leaned forward and asked the question he’d been holding back. “Sirius, how is she?”

Sirius looked around nervously. “Not here, Harry! Someone could hear us.”

Harry whipped out his wand and muttered, “Muffliato.” He replaced his wand and grinned at Sirius. “Now they can’t.”

After Harry had explained the spell’s function to Sirius, insisting he’d found the incantation in an odd book in the library, Sirius finally began divulging the information Harry wanted so badly to hear. “Ginny is fine. She still sleeps most of the day, but yesterday she took some food. Emmeline Vance has done a marvelous job watching out for her. I don’t know what Regulus and I would have done without Emmeline—obviously we’re not the best choices to look after a sixteen-year-old girl. Lily, Kiara, and Felicia have been taking shifts as well. Mrs. Weasley apparates over every day, but she can’t stay at Grimmauld Place all the time or the Aurors would suspect something.”

“How are the Weasleys taking it? Not being able to be with Ginny all the time, I mean,” Harry asked.

Sirius sighed. “It’s really hard on the Weasleys to realise that they’ll never have Ginny to themselves again unless they leave the country.

Here she'll always be hunted, and they'll always be watched." He brightened. "On the good side, the Aurors aren't putting much effort into looking for her, past the first day, I mean."

"Why not?"

"It seems that most of the decent people were of the opinion that fifteen years in Azkaban was much too harsh a sentence for a twelve-year-old girl. Many were both shocked and happy when she escaped. It was only the Ministry workers who were so adamant that she was guilty of all charges, and I suspect many of them are followers of Voldemort, if not outright Death Eaters."

"Were you questioned at all?"

Sirius shrugged. "A bit. A couple Aurors interrogated me. I just told them I'd gone to Azkaban to visit Ginny since I was a friend of the family, and my cousin had come along because he was visiting from France and wanted to see the prison facilities in England. There wasn't much they could do. I mean, we didn't have wands, did we? The Aurors couldn't figure out how we could've given Ginny something to help her escape four days later. Portkeys don't work in Azkaban."

Harry contemplated this. "I'm glad our plan worked."

"Me too," Sirius said soberly. "I really didn't want to spend the next ten years in Azkaban."

"Me three," Leila chimed in. "Want to know why?"

"Why?" Harry asked, looking at her inquisitively.

She rolled her eyes. "If you two had ended up in Azkaban, I would've had to become an Animagus so I could rescue both of *you*," she huffed, and Sirius and Harry howled in laughter.

"I can just see it now. Leila the raccoon," Harry joked.

Leila turned red. "Now, wait just a minute..."

Sirius caught on. "No, Leila would make a great parrot. She never does stop talking, does she?" he said, winking at Harry.

"Naw, a parrot is too good. I think she'd be a great... um... rabbit! That's it, she'd be a good rabbit."

"No, a rabbit is too passive for her. She'd make a great wasp."

"Wasp? Hardly! How about a skunk?"

"A ferret?"

Harry bent over double laughing as the image of Leila the ferret flashed through his mind. *Yeah, she and Malfoy would be best pals.* "How about a chipmunk?"

He and Sirius threw out odd animal form suggestions for a few minutes. Finally Leila spoke. "Are you two done?" she said haughtily.

"For now," Harry said, smirking.

"Good then," she said, raising her chin. "'Cause you're late for your detention."

Author's Note: I bought DH last night and read it in five and a half hours. How many of you are done reading it? How long did it take you? How'd you like it? Answer in your review! But don't post spoilers, please.

I must say, after reading DH I was kinda depressed... Here I am, writing pitiful fanfiction compared to Rowling's masterpiece series. I was tempted just to quit. But the ideas for this story will not leave me alone, so I continue on.

Chapter 32

Harry ran down the stairs to Moody's office, his feet pounding against the stone floors. Glancing nervously at his watch, he picked up his pace. Moody hated tardiness.

Harry tentatively pushed open the door to the Defence classroom. It was completely dark, except for a strip of light that was coming from under the door to Moody's office. "Lumos," Harry whispered, and made his way across the empty classroom. He knocked.

The door swung open. "You're late, Potter," the Auror growled. "Come in."

Harry hung his head as he followed Moody inside.

"Take a seat."

Harry perched himself on the stool and looked up expectantly. "I assume I'm not here for detention, sir."

"On the contrary, Potter," Moody said with a glint in his eye. "You're in for the worst detention you've ever experienced in all your years at Hogwarts."

Harry grinned. "I highly doubt it. Unless you plan on subjecting me to some form of cruel and unusual torture, your detentions couldn't be any worse than Um..." Mid-sentence, Harry decided not to tell Moody about the Blood Quill. He quickly changed directions. "Any worse than some of my detentions."

But Moody was leaning forward in his chair. "To which specific detention are you referring to, Potter?"

"Uh, Snape's," Harry said quickly. He had never been a good liar, though, and from the glare Moody was giving him, it looked as if the Auror felt the same way.

"The truth, Potter."

Harry sighed. "Do you know a Ministry worker by the name of Dolores Umbridge?"

A scowl confirmed that Moody was, in fact, acquainted with the woman. "We've met," Moody said noncommittally.

"She was our Defence teacher in my fifth year?"

"*Umbridge*? Dumbledore would've never allowed it!"

"He didn't have much of a choice," Harry said, shrugging. "The Ministry appointed her. Well, I got in trouble for telling the truth about Voldemort's return, and she gave me two weeks of detention. Writing lines with a Blood Quill for four hours every night."

Moody was silent. Harry looked down at his right hand, and balled it into a fist. The thin scars reading "I will not tell lies" were gone.

"You wouldn't have the scars in the new reality," Moody said suddenly, standing to his feet and walking over to his trunk.

"Why not?" Harry said before he could help himself.

"From what I know of an Aperio, and that is very little, a participant who has changed realities has also changed bodies, unless they themselves did not exist in the new reality. Since you already existed in this world, your mind and soul simply inhabited your body. That's why you have kept your memories and abilities."

"That's why my scar is gone," Harry muttered, running his finger over the spot on his forehead where the lightning-shaped scar had once been.

"So Umbridge made you write lines with a Blood Quill," Moody said, turning to face Harry. "By the end of tonight, you'll be begging for your other reality, Potter."

Harry grinned, and stood up. "Bring it on," he invited.

Leila's guess had been correct. Moody had given Harry detention with the intention of teaching him more advanced spells. Since the

office wasn't big enough, they practised in the classroom. With a few flicks of Moody's wand, the candles were lit, and the desks had vanished.

"Right, Potter. Let's start with a simple duel to see where you are."

Harry stepped back, bowed to Moody, and waited for the Auror to cast the first spell. They exchanged wand-fire for a few minutes, before Moody threw up his hands. "Very good, Potter. Well done, but..."

Harry had lowered his wand when the Auror seemed to be quitting. In an instant, Moody had cried, "Expelliarmus!" and Harry's wand flew into his outstretched hand.

"But you're far too trusting! Constant vigilance, Potter, it's the only way you'll ever survive a duel with a real Death Eater. They don't ask permission before they begin firing spells at you. They won't be noble and decent when it comes to the methods they use either. They'll use the Unforgivables. They'll torture and kill the people you love in front of your eyes. You've got to be vigilant!"

Harry hung his head and held out his hand for his wand. "Not yet," Moody said with a smirk and Harry's head shot up.

"N-no wand, s-sir?" he said incredulously.

"Not yet," Moody repeated. "Now, Potter, let's see how good you are at dodging spells."

Two hours passed quickly, and by the time Moody released Harry, assigning him another "detention" to be preformed one week later in the same place, Harry's entire body ached. He had dodged, ducked, and rolled for the first hour, avoiding the majority of Moody's curses. Many had hit him, though, including several stinging hexes, Jelly-Legs Jinxes, and forceful Disarming Spells. During the second hour, Harry had began learning how to conjure a stronger shield, one that could protect him from almost any spell with the exception of the Unforgivables. ("That's what the dodging exercises are for, Potter," Moody growled.)

He wearily pulled himself up the stairs to the portrait hole. Although his body was protesting, his heart felt light. He was actually learning something useful, something that might save his life next time he duelled a Death Eater. Moody was an excellent teacher, but definitely not for the faint of heart.

“Why so bloody cheerful?” the Fat Lady complained as Harry chirped the password.

“Nothing,” he said, grinning at her as he stepped forward into the Common Room. Fortunately it was empty, so Harry headed upstairs to get some much-needed rest.

The next couple weeks flew by. Harry found that all of his classes were much easier than normal, with the exception of Potions. He’d never been good at Potions. *This must be how Hermione feels all the time*, Harry mused as he slowly adjusted to the new position of smartest Gryffindor. With it came responsibilities, though. He was constantly being besieged by his classmates wanting help with new Defence spells, Charms essays, and Herbology projects. He was glad to help them, thanking Merlin that he’d already learned how to properly teach in Dumbledore’s Army his fifth year.

But soon his schedule became even more hectic, as the Gryffindor team began increasing its practices in the hope of winning the Quidditch Cup. Prefect duties became a constant annoyance, and Harry started to wish McGonagall had given someone else the badge. He had been jealous of Ron his fifth year when his best mate was made Prefect, but now, he wasn’t so sure he’d feel the same if he ever got back to the other reality.

Sirius visited Harry and Leila in the Gryffindor Common Room as often as he could, telling them more stories of his Hogwarts years and the Marauders. Leila especially liked the stories involving James’ many unsuccessful attempts to get Lily to go out with him. Harry, on the other hand, always requested stories regarding their pranks and trips to the Shrieking Shack every full moon.

One day, Sirius showed up at a Quidditch Practice. Afterwards he confided to Harry that out of the four teams, Gryffindor’s was probably the best. “You’d better get the Quidditch Cup, or else,” Sirius

threatened. “During staff meetings Slughorn has been bragging incessantly about Slytherin’s team. If Gryffindor doesn’t win, I might be forced to push him off of the Astronomy Tower. I can’t take his boasting any more.”

“Detentions” with Moody continued on a weekly basis. Harry was slowly improving. His shield was now strong enough to hold off a continuous stream of curses for several minutes. He was getting better at avoiding curses too. Rarely did one of Moody’s spells hit him any more. The Auror had proclaimed Harry ready to move on to more advanced spellwork, and they were now working on several spells that were required for acceptance into the Auror Training Academy.

Harry continued to make up excuses why he had detention with Moody each week, but Jeremy and Demelza were getting very suspicious. Finally he and Moody staged an incident one day in the corridor. Harry hexed a Slytherin and Moody was instantly there, shouting that he was giving Harry detention every Wednesday until Christmas holidays. After that, Harry’s friends stopped asking questions, but Harry knew they were still suspicious. Jeremy especially couldn’t figure out how Harry became so damn smart over the summer, and said so often enough. The Quidditch team as well were still marveling over Harry’s astonishing Seeker skills, and Harry and Leila had to tell circles of lies to appease the loads of questions they were asked.

“This is exhausting,” Leila said, after one particular Quidditch practice. Harry had caught the Snitch in record time tonight—nine minutes and forty-seven seconds. Now he and Leila were collapsed into their favourite chairs in the Common Room. “Telling lies, I mean,” she finished when Harry gave her an inquisitive look.

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said, staring into the flames.

“I wish you could just tell the truth and get it over with.”

Harry gave a harsh laugh. “The truth? People wouldn’t believe me.”

Leila scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I mean, everyone you’ve told so far has believed you.”

“You, McGonagall, and Moody,” Harry reminded her. “McGonagall and Moody heard or noticed too much, and they knew what Aperiors were. Of course they believed me. And you, well, you’re my sister. You’re entitled to believe me.”

“Am not!” Leila said, smacking him. “I *told* you, the only reason I believed you was because it was the only thing that made sense.”

“Whatever,” Harry said, grinning at her. He sobered. “There’s one thing I can’t figure out, though.”

“What’s that?”

Harry frowned. “You noticed something was wrong right away and confronted me. Why didn’t Mum and Dad ever ask me why I was acting weird?”

Leila suddenly turned pink and looked away. “No clue,” she said unconvincingly.

“Leila...”

She was looking very guilty now. “I don’t know,” she insisted.

“Why didn’t Mum and Dad ask?” Harry repeated, annoyed. “It’s OK, you can tell me.”

“I...”

“Leila! What did you do?”

“Nothing!”

“The truth, Leila.”

“Alright, alright!” she said, exasperated. “You’ll kill me.”

“What’d you do?”

She still wasn’t meeting his eyes. “Mum and Dad were really worried after the first day of summer, you know, that whole long conversation you had with them about the Order, the Ministry and Ginny. They

thought maybe you'd been hit in the head or something. Well, after you told me the truth, I knew they couldn't find out about the Aperio. Especially..." She swallowed. "Especially if something happened so that you'd have to reverse it."

"I am *not* reversing the Aperio!" Harry said angrily. "I would never..."

"I *know*, Harry! I know! But all I'm saying is that something *might* happen. You never know. But I knew Mum and Dad couldn't find out that you were from another reality where Pettigrew caused their deaths and you were the Chosen One to defeat Vol..." She gulped, then looked up. "V-Voldemort. It'd just be too much for them to handle. They might not understand that you still have to defeat V-Voldemort, and they might prevent you from doing what you need to do. So I... I..."

"You what?" Harry pressed.

"I Obliviated them," she whispered.

"You *what?*" Harry almost shouted, horrified.

"Quiet, Harry, people are watching!" Leila hissed. "I knew you wouldn't agree, so I didn't tell you. I made them forget about the conversation they had with you the first day of summer, and every time I heard them discussing something small you'd done that wasn't really you, I put Memory Charms on them. No, I didn't make them forget anything important. Just little things, like the different food you ate, the things you had trouble remembering, stuff like that."

Harry sat back, stunned. So *that* was why his parents never confronted him. He had wondered why they kept throwing him odd glances but never said anything. But Obliviating them? That seemed a little extreme. One third of him was angry at Leila, another third just grateful for all the uncomfortable questions she'd gotten him out of. The last third of him was curious.

"Leila, where on earth did you learn how to do Memory Charms?"

She blushed again. "I...uh...I looked them up in the library and learned them in my fourth year."

“Why?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” she said, tossing her head.

Harry sighed. “I wish you’d told me.”

Leila hung her head. “Sorry.”

“It’s OK,” he said, shrugging. “I just can’t believe you did it. I guess you saved me from a lot of uncomfortable conversations, huh? I should be grateful. But please don’t do it again?”

She nodded.

“I’ll take care of Mum and Dad this time,” Harry told her, smirking. “I’m not two, you know.”

“You act like it,” Leila told him, but she was grinning. Just then, the Portrait Hole opened and Sirius walked in.

“Hey, squirt,” he greeted Lila, ruffling her hair. “Harry.”

“Hey, Sirius. How’d you get the password?” Harry asked.

“Neville,” Sirius said simply, throwing himself into an armchair. “So, what are you two up to?”

“Arguing,” Leila said promptly. “I was just telling Harry here that he should buy purple dress robes for the Yule Ball this year. He disagrees—he thinks he’d look stunning in pink.”

Sirius howled with laughter, and Harry’s face grew hot instantly. “Leila!” he exclaimed.

“Yeah...” Sirius gasped between laughs. “Pink... would...” Chuckle. “Look marvelous with...” Snort. “Your eyes, Harry!”

Harry gaped at him, trying desperately to think of a good comeback, but failing miserably. Leila was in fits of giggles. Harry finally resorted to glaring at them both until they finally stopped laughing.

“What’d you come for?” Harry asked, annoyed.

Sirius wiped away mock tears. “Is that how my only godson treats me? I’m shattered.”

Leila laughed again as Harry rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I meant! I only wondered if you came here for the sole purpose of annoying me, or if it was some other reason.”

Sirius looked around. “Harry, can you do that Muffliato spell again?”

Harry quickly cast the spell, and looked back at his godfather expectantly.

“I came to tell you that there’s another Order meeting scheduled. Tomorrow night.”

Author’s Note: I had several betas reading earlier chapters tell me that the biggest hole in my story was the fact that Lily and James never talked to Harry about acting weird. Here’s the answer. Someday, Leila may tell Harry why she had to learn Memory Charms. But not yet.

I think the best thing about DH is the fanfiction opportunities it opened up. I mean, I was reading that book and literally dozens of ideas for new stories were popping into my head. I’d love to see someone write a story about DH from Ginny, Neville, or Luna’s POV. That’d be cool.

I’ll keep posting once a day until I catch up with myself. Then you guys will just have to wait until I finish a new chapter to read it.

Keep the reviews coming! Next chapter, Order Business.

Chapter 33

At seven sharp, Harry and Sirius went to McGonagall's office and flooed to Grimmauld Place. McGonagall had given them the password in advance, since she would be arriving from a different location. "Board meeting at the Ministry of Magic," she had explained, wearing a very distasteful look.

When Harry stumbled out of the kitchen fireplace, he heard voices coming from the living room.

"I think everyone's already here," Sirius said, brushing the ash from his clothing. "Let's not make them wait any longer."

Harry walked toward the doorway. As soon as he entered the room, however, the talking stopped. Someone began applauding, and the others joined in. Fred and George were wolf-whistling. Harry froze in the doorway, his face turning bright red. Behind him, Sirius clapped a few times before shoving Harry into the room. Grinning foolishly, Harry ducked his head and scurried over to where Fred and George were sitting.

"Way to go, mate," George said, slapping Harry on the back.

"We're proud of you, son," James called across the room. Next to him, Lily was beaming.

"Getting Ginny out of Azkaban... We'll never be able to repay you for what you've done," Mr. Weasley said gravely.

"It was nothing," Harry said, blushing an even deeper shade of red. "It was a month and a half ago!"

"And the Order as a group still hasn't properly thanked you," Lupin said from his place in the front.

"We stand rebuked," Moody said. "We sat in our seats and claimed there was nothing we could do for Ginevra, while unbeknownst to us, a sixteen-year-old boy was already putting together a daring but plausible rescue plan."

"Sirius helped," Harry mumbled.

"But you were the one who spent four days in Azkaban," Lupin reminded him.

"And you were the one that escaped, not me," Sirius said, sliding into the seat next to Harry.

"It was nothing," Harry insisted, his face burning.

Frank Longbottom snorted. "Balderdash, Harry. You did what two dozen full grown wizards and witches were afraid to even think about." Harry glanced nervously at him and Alice. "Don't worry," Frank continued quickly. "Alice and I aren't on the case anymore."

"Who is?"

"A few Aurors you don't know. All they're doing now is monitoring the Weasleys to make sure Ginevra doesn't try to contact them in any way. They're not even looking anymore."

"Sirius said a lot of them believe she was innocent. Is that true?" Harry asked.

Alice nodded. "Since her escape, the details of her trial were given some consideration, and the results were astounding." She gave a tiny smile. "I daresay if she's ever 'found' she'll get a proper trial this time, and not even Lucius Malfoy could prevent it. The people are on her side."

Harry nodded, relieved.

"So, what say you to a toast?" Lupin called from the front, and instantly Harry was holding an empty glass.

"Just speak to it and your favorite drink will appear," Fred told him.

"Butterbeer," Harry said, and the glass was instantly full to the brim. He noticed that the others were making their orders as well.

"A toast," said Moody, raising his chalice full of Firewhisky, "to Harry Potter!"

"Harry Potter!" the others said, raising their glasses towards Harry.

Glasses clinked. "Now, to business," Lupin began, but Harry jumped up.

"Hang on, you can't just stop there," he insisted, looking around. "You've got to give Sirius credit too. Without him, none of this would've happened. He was the mastermind behind it all, and he would've been the one staying in Azkaban while I escorted Ginny out if it had been remotely possible. How about a toast to Sirius?"

The Order readily agreed. Sirius, in turn, proposed a toast to Regulus, who had done his fair share in the rescue and care of both Ginny. Harry twisted around and caught a glimpse of Sirius's brother lurking in the shadows. But when the Order members, including Molly Weasley, enthusiastically toasted him as well, he looked a little more comfortable and actually accepted the seat Kingsley Shacklebolt offered him.

"I'm sure we'd all love to spend all evening singing the praises of the three bravest in our midst," Lupin said dryly. Harry glanced at him quickly, and noticed his eyes were twinkling. "But we do have some business to attend to," Lupin finished. "Shall we start with a Horcrux destruction report? Regulus?"

The man stood. "For obvious reasons, I haven't had a whole lot of time to work on the Horcruxes," he said, and several people murmured in agreement. Since Sirius was at Hogwarts, the duty fell to Regulus to keep things running at Grimmauld Place, which had quickly become the headquarters for the New Order of the Phoenix. On top of that, Ginny was still staying at Grimmauld Place. Emmeline Vance didn't want her moved for several months as she recovered. Ginny couldn't exactly go back to the Burrow anyway. Kiara, Emmeline, the dark haired witch who had been helping Lily and McGonagall with their research project (Harry thought her name might be Felicia), and a witch Sirius had introduced as his aunt, Andromeda Tonks, had been staying with Ginny in shifts so the girl would never have to be without female companionship. Despite their

help, though, the burden of cooking and cleaning—Kreacher was no longer around—had fallen to Regulus.

“I have, however, finally worked out the series of spells to destroy the diary. I believe it has special charms so that only a Basilisk’s poison can destroy it,” Regulus continued. “The ring, on the other hand, is proving to be most difficult of all, the complex spells surrounding it being very hard to decipher. I’ve made some progress, but I can’t promise speed.”

He sat down, and Lupin nodded, a satisfied look on his face. “How about the research?”

“I might have found something,” the dark haired witch said tentatively.

Lupin smiled at her. “Go ahead, Felicia.”

“I came across an old letter from Filius Flitwick’s grandmother to her niece who was to be married. The letter spoke of a tiara, a family heirloom, which the writer of the letter wished her niece could wear at her wedding. However, the tiara had been misplaced.”

“Flitwick is a direct descendent of Rowena Ravenclaw herself,” Lily breathed.

“Exactly,” Felicia said, her face lighting up. “It can’t be coincidental. Ravenclaw owned a similar tiara, and though the books say that all her possessions were destroyed, I have yet to find solid proof that a tiara couldn’t have survived somehow.”

“It’s worth a look, anyway,” Lupin said. “Excellent work! Any ideas where the tiara could be?”

Felicia shook her head. “We’ll work on it.”

“Thank you. Now, how’s the Great Distraction going?”

Sirius and James gave a quick report of the various appearances Order members had been making in places where Death Eaters were known to lurk, and the rumours that were being spread.

“Good, good,” Lupin said, making some more notes on a parchment. “I think that’s all the business we have tonight. Oh, except for the snake, Nagini. Any ideas on how we’ll get a hold of her?”

Several people looked uncomfortably at each other. “There’s no way we can kill the snake,” Kiara piped up from her seat next to Bill. “You yourself told us she stays with Lord Voldemort at all times.”

Lupin sighed. “Unfortunately this is true. The one thing we need and lack is a trustworthy spy from inside Death Eater ranks. Is there any way we can acquire one?”

Mundungus Fletcher looked thoughtful. “I have a few connections with Death Eaters,” he said in a low voice. “I might be able to convince one of the newer recruits to become our spy. The new ones are the most susceptible. They’re usually the ones wishing they’d never joined, and looking for an easy way out. The Order can offer them protection if they’re caught.”

“As long as the Death Eaters don’t kill them first,” Lupin muttered. “And we’ve got another problem. Only the highest-ranking Death Eaters are allowed in Lord Voldemort’s inner circle. They’re probably the only ones who ever see the snake.”

“I can see we’ve got a serious problem here,” McGonagall said. “I suggest we let it rest and mull over it until the next Order meeting.”

Lupin nodded. “Good advice.” He looked around at the Order. “I think that about covers it. Is there anything I’ve missed?”

McGonagall took a deep breath. “I have a matter to put before you,” she said. “Someone has requested that they be allowed to join the Order.”

“And who is it?”

“Luzita Clark,” McGonagall told them. Her voice was neutral, but after saying the name, her lips formed a thin line.

“Luzita Clark?” Lupin said, his eyebrows shooting up. “The new Transfiguration teacher?”

"She's the worst teacher of the lot," Harry murmured to Fred and George who were looking at him inquisitively. "She's always giving Slytherins loads of points they don't deserve."

Fred and George exchanged dark looks.

"She approached you about joining?" Lupin continued.

"She did."

Lupin looked around. "What do we know about Luzita Clark?"

"She comes from a traditionally light family," Lily said.

"She didn't go to Hogwarts," McGonagall added. "Her parents were from America, and they moved to Britain right before You Know Who's return to power."

"They've always fought against the Muggle-born bans and other discriminating laws," Arthur Weasley said.

"Her parents and grandparents were all killed about three years ago by Death Eaters, weren't they?" Alice Longbottom asked.

"Yes, they were," Moody confirmed. "I think after that her remaining siblings went back to America. She's the only one who stayed."

"I can't imagine her being anything but loyal to the light," James said. "Especially after her parents' deaths."

Harry bit his lip. He didn't trust Clark at all. Not after the things she did at Hogwarts. Transfiguration had quickly become his least favourite class. But he wasn't going to say anything. *They'd ask me why I didn't like her, and the best reply I'd have is, She favours Slytherins!*

Moody seemed to be of the same mind, though. "I don't think we should let her in the Order," he growled. "There's something about her I can't put my finger on. I don't trust her."

"You don't trust anyone, Mad-Eye," Sirius said, snorting.

"We've got to take into consideration that the more people we let in, the more likely something will slip out," McGonagall pointed out. "I agree with Alastor."

"But she might be of great help to us! What if she knew something about Ravenclaw's tiara?" Felicia argued.

"Felicia's right," Lily said. "If I remember correctly, her family was known for brilliance in many areas. When you hired her, you said her records said she'd received the highest A.W.T. scores in a century," she continued, looking pointedly at McGonagall.

"What are A.W.T.'s?" Harry asked the twins quietly.

"I think it's the American equivalent to N.E.W.T.'s," George whispered. "Stands for Advanced Wizarding Test, or something like that."

"What reason do we have not to trust her?" Kiara said evenly. "I knew her family when I used to live in America. As far as I know, no dark wizards ever came from their family."

"We can't just blindly trust someone because of their family!" McGonagall exclaimed, her eyebrows knitting together.

"But family loyalties are often good indicators," Molly Weasley countered.

"Not always," Moody growled. "Just look at Sirius and Regulus."

Harry sneaked a quick glance at both Black brothers, but neither seemed to be offended by the comment.

"What do you think, Remus?" Bill asked.

At the front, Lupin seemed to be thinking the matter over. "I think we should vote on it," he said at last. "Is there any more discussion before we vote?"

No one said anything, but McGonagall looked like she wanted to.

“Good, then. All in favor of admitting Luzita Clark into the Order, raise your hands.”

Harry’s heart sank. A clear majority had voted to allow Clark in, including his parents.

“All right. Not that it’s necessary, but who votes against letting Clark join?” Lupin asked.

Harry held up his hand. Next to him, the twins raised their hands. Obviously in their minds, favoring Slytherins was definitely a crime worthy of exclusion from the Order. To Harry’s surprise, McGonagall and Moody voted “no” as well.

“That settles it then,” Lupin said. “Minerva, will you bring Luzita up to date about Order affairs before the next meeting?”

“I would be happy to,” McGonagall replied politely, but she looked anything but happy.

Author’s Note: Next chapter, the famed Ginny/Harry conversation.

Thanks to all the people who have been beta-ing for me, Andy and Diana.

Chapter 34

A half hour later, most of the Order members had apparated or flooded away. Harry stood and shot a questioning glance at Sirius. "I'm ready," Sirius said, standing as well. "I guess we should go."

"No, wait," Regulus said suddenly. "Before you go, Harry, there's someone who has been asking to see you."

"Ginny?" Harry asked, suddenly feeling like he had a dozen bowtruckles in his stomach.

Regulus nodded, the edges of his mouth curving up in amusement. "She's upstairs."

Ignoring the knowing looks his parents and Sirius were exchanging, Harry dashed across the room and took the stairs two at a time. When he reached the landing, he slowed, trying to calm his beating heart. *It's just Ginny*, Harry told himself forcefully. *Just Ginny! So why do I feel so nervous?*

He made his way down the hallway and paused in front of Ginny's door, wondering if he should knock. What if she was sleeping? Maybe he shouldn't disturb her. In the end, his desire to see her won out and Harry raised his hand and tapped three times on the door.

"Come in," a soft voice called.

Heart racing, Harry pushed open the door.

Ginny was propped up against some pillows. Her red hair was spread over the pillows, framing her painfully gaunt face. She was holding a cup of tea in her hand, but when she saw Harry, she set the cup down. Harry couldn't help but notice that her hands were trembling with effort.

"Come in, please," Ginny said, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

Harry shut the door and ventured nearer. "Sit down, the girl instructed, a hint of smile playing across her face.

He sat in the chair next to her bedside. Ginny turned her face towards him, and the dim light reflected off of her luminous eyes.

"How're you feeling?" Harry said, finally finding his voice.

"Better," Ginny replied, still looking at him with wide brown eyes.

Harry cleared his throat. "Er, you look better than the last time I saw you."

Ginny laughed, but it turned into a hacking cough that racked her whole body. Harry watched, frozen, unsure of what to do. "Should I get someone?" he asked urgently.

She shook her head, still coughing. "I'm alright," Ginny assured him once she could speak again. She took another sip of tea. "Emmeline thinks I look better too, but Lily still says I look like a Natzy camp survivor, whatever that is." She looked him over appraisingly. "Is Lily your mum?"

Harry nodded.

"I thought so. You have her eyes. She's nice," Ginny continued, but suddenly she scowled. "Lily still won't tell me what a Natzy camp survivor is, though." Her expression grew hopeful. "Do you know?"

Harry gave her a quick explanation of Hitler, the Nazis, and the concentration camps. When he finished, Ginny nodded sagely. "I suppose Azkaban can't be much better than those...what did you call them, concentration camps?"

"Azkaban is worse," Harry said flatly.

"I don't know." Ginny frowned. "At least in Azkaban the prisoners had to work. And they gave us more food than the Nazis gave those poor Muggles."

"Azkaban has Dementors," Harry argued. "I'd rather be in a concentration camp any day."

Ginny eyed him thoughtfully, and Harry turned red. He hadn't meant to come in here and start an argument about Azkaban versus concentration camps. He hadn't meant to bring up Azkaban at all, actually. The silence grew long and uncomfortable.

"I never got a chance to thank you," Ginny said suddenly, her voice stronger.

"No need," Harry began, but she interrupted him.

"No, Harry, I do need to thank you. What you did...you didn't just get me out of Azkaban, you saved my life. Emmeline says that another year probably would have killed me, and I'd only been there four years—not even a third of my sentence. I owe you my life. It probably would've only been a few more months before I went insane...the Dementors..." She closed her eyes and shuddered.

"It was nothing," Harry insisted.

Her eyes flew open. "Stop saying that. Listen to me, Harry, it wasn't just *nothing* that you did. It was something. It was something probably no other Order member would have done. But what I still can't understand is *why* you did it. What reason did you have to rescue me? You hardly knew me at all."

Harry blinked. "You were innocent."

She gave him a very Mrs. Weasley-ish glare that was nearly as effective, despite her current condition. "That may work on some people, Potter, but it doesn't work on me. There are dozens of people in Azkaban that are innocent. I heard them talking at night. You didn't risk your life to save them, did you? I want to know—why did you do it?"

Harry gaped at her. She wasn't stupid—she had seen past his excuses and stories. "I can't tell you now."

"I deserve to know, don't you think?"

Harry said nothing, looking pointedly away.

"I've been through every possible solution, you know," Ginny continued. "I've had hours to think about it. The only plausible reason I can think of is that you felt guilty. Is that true?"

"Guilt is the only thing that makes sense," Ginny continued, when Harry refused to answer the question. "Unless you had some romantic motives..." She trailed off, and Harry's face burned hot.

"No! I mean, I didn't... I don't..."

Ginny began to laugh. Harry held his breath for a moment, then joined in when he was sure she wasn't going to start coughing.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," she said, her eyes glinting. "I'm just telling you what I think. Are you going to tell me the truth or not?"

"No," Harry said bluntly.

Ginny sighed. "Did you really think it was in any way your fault that I ended up in Azkaban? It wasn't, you know. How could you have known what the Diary did? How could you have known that I was opening the Chamber? I just don't understand—I mean, I can see Percy or Ron or even the twins doing something crazy because they felt guilty. They weren't at fault, of course, but if anyone should've felt guilty, it would've been them. But you? You don't even know my family. You and Ron hate each other. Why would you put yourself at such a risk to get me out of Azkaban if you didn't feel somewhat responsible?"

"You don't understand," Harry burst out before he could stop himself. "It was my fault. It was my fault you ended up in Azkaban."

"Tell me why."

"No."

"Harry..."

"Ginny, listen," he said, cutting her off. "I'm not going to tell you why, but it was my fault, I swear. I'm not lying to you. Do you want me to take Veritiserum or something?"

“Sure,” she said cheekily. “Then you’d have to tell me why, too.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Girls,” he muttered, and she laughed softly. Unfortunately it was replaced once again with a racking cough.

Ginny closed her eyes and lay very still against the pillows, breathing labourously after the coughing fit ended. She was trembling again, and Harry felt a pang in his chest. It wasn’t fair—he was strong and fit, but she was lying here, weak and looking like a bit of wind might blow her away.

Harry thought she might have fallen asleep. He shifted in his chair, wondering if he should go. But then her eyes opened, and she spoke again.

“Harry, promise me one thing?”

“Anything.”

“You said you can’t tell me now,” she whispered, and Harry leaned forward to hear her words. “Promise me you’ll tell me the truth someday, will you?”

Harry paused for a long moment. Her brown eyes pled with him, and he melted.

“I promise.”

He and Sirius floored back to school, along with McGonagall. They asked Moody if he’d like to join them, but Moody opted instead to go have a drink at the Hog’s Head. “Just don’t come back drunk,” McGonagall instructed sternly. “Think of the students.”

“Come on, Harry, I’ll walk you back to the Common Room,” Sirius said, helping Harry up off the carpet where he was sprawled in front of the fireplace.

“I hate floor,” Harry muttered, brushing off his clothes. “G’night, professor,” he called to McGonagall before following Sirius out the door.

They rode down the moving staircase and trekked through several corridors. Harry was silent, lost in thought.

"Knut for your thoughts," Sirius said.

Harry woke from his reverie. "Huh? Oh, nothing important."

Sirius stopped and looked him over. "Are you alright, Harry?"

"Of course I am," Harry said, annoyed. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I dunno. You've just been quiet lately."

"I've been busy," Harry said. It came out harsher than he'd intended.

"Busy?"

Harry sighed in exasperation. "I'm a *Prefect*, Sirius. And Quidditch Captain. And I'm taking five classes, and I'm in the Order! Oh, and I've got detention with Moody every week until Christmas. Of course I'm busy."

Sirius looked thoughtful. He began to walk again. "I understand the meaning of the word 'busy,' Harry. What I'm worried about is that you're taking school too seriously. You never give yourself any time to have fun."

"*Fun?*"

"You know, something that provides mirth or amusement?"

"I have fun," Harry insisted. "I've just been...preoccupied...lately."

It wasn't a lie. He *had* been preoccupied. His classwork, Prefect duties, detentions...

"Preoccupied, huh?"

Harry said nothing.

"Fine, don't tell me," Sirius huffed. "But you used to get a lot more enjoyment out of life. I bet you haven't broken a rule in weeks."

“I *told* you, I hexed that Slytherin and got deten—“

“That was a month ago! What I mean is that you need to relax. Have some fun. Stop taking life so seriously.”

Harry sighed again. Sirius was obviously not going to give up until Harry committed to *something*.

“And what would you suggest?”

Sirius shot him a sly grin. “Meet me at eight-thirty outside of the Great Hall tomorrow night and you’ll see.”

When Harry reached the Common Room, he looked around for Leila, but she was nowhere to be found. He asked Melissa if Leila was in her dorm.

“I didn’t see her,” the girl insisted. “Maybe she’s in the library.”

Harry frowned. It was past nine...the library was closed. Where could she be?

He retrieved his bag from his room and spread out his books. Slughorn had assigned a foot-long essay on the properties and ingredients of Strengthening Solutions.

An hour later, the Common Room was empty, and the essay was finished, but there was still no sign of Leila. Harry was beginning to get worried, when finally the Portrait Hole opened and Leila stumbled in.

“Where have you been?” Harry demanded, jumping out of his chair.

“Library,” she panted. She looked as if she’d been running.

“The library closed an hour ago,” Harry said, giving her a quizzical look.

“I...got delayed...Slughorn wanted to talk to me about something...”

“Why are you running?”

“Filch...”

“Slughorn didn’t give you a note?”

“He must’ve forgotten,” she said, slumping down in her favourite armchair. “Who made you my mum?”

“I was worried!”

“Well, in the future, I’m sixteen, not six, and I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” she snapped.

Harry wisely dropped the subject—she was obviously not in the mood—but something about her story didn’t line up. There was something she still wasn’t telling him.

“How’d the Order meeting go?” Leila said, interrupting into his thoughts.

Harry told her almost everything, but omitted parts of his conversation with Ginny after the meeting. Leila was outraged to hear that Luzita Clark had been admitted into the Order. “The witch,” she snarled. “Why’d they let her in?”

“They voted,” Harry explained, leaning back in his own chair.

“That was bloody stupid of them,” she exclaimed, and Harry had to agree.

“I don’t trust her,” he said flatly. “But for now, there’s nothing we can do.”

“What if she’s actually a Death Eater?” Leila argued.

“What if her awful personality is just who she is, and she really is loyal to the Light?” Harry said. “Besides, Moody will probably check her over to see if she has a Dark Mark or not.”

“I still think you should be careful about what you tell her,” Leila said. “Just out of principle.”

Author's Note: Next chapter... Nighttime Wanderings. Does anyone have a good idea for a Marauders' nickname Harry can use in his Animagus form? (It's a falcon, BTW, for those of you who have already forgotten parts of the story.) I'm horrible at coming up with nicknames.

I posted a new humor oneshot story. If you have time, read it and tell me whether you thought it was funny or not. It's called, *The Trio and Ginny Read Fanfiction*. The story was an idea that came to me last Saturday and I was wondering what our favorite characters would say if they ever got online and browsed fanfiction . net. You can find the link on my profile page.

Chapter 35

“Faster, Potter! Faster! Use your feet!” Moody yelled. Harry swore under his breath and increased the number of spells he was shooting at the Auror. He tried to concentrate on casting curses while at the same time dodging and running from the enchanted Bludgers with spikes that were coming at him from every angle.

It was Thursday afternoon, and Harry was in his weekly “detention” with Mad-Eye. Moody had moved the detention to Thursday because the Order meeting had been scheduled the night before. Fortunately, Harry was free—his Herbology and Potions classes met in the morning.

Harry had been at this odd duel for nearly an hour now, and his shirt was completely soaked with sweat, which was also running down his face and dripping off his nose. He gritted his teeth and released a string of nonverbal spells in rapid fire. *Expelliarmus! Levicorpus! Reducto!*

Moody was standing in the middle of the room, flicking the spells away as one would a pesky fly, and occasionally sending spells back at Harry. After another few minutes, one of the Bludgers collided with Harry’s arm and sent him sprawling on the floor.

“You just got hit by a curse. You’re dead, Potter,” Moody said casually, waving his wand. The Bludgers immediately subdued and flew back into the box. “That’s not even a little of what a real fight with Death Eaters is like,” he continued, making no move to help Harry off the floor. With a grunt, Harry rolled over and sat up, wincing as he examined his arm. Gingerly, he tested it, but it wasn’t broken. A stream of blood was flowing from the gash where the enchanted Bludger’s spike had driven into his flesh.

“Episky,” Harry muttered, pointing the wand at the wound. Immediately the blood stopped flowing, and the gash healed up. He groaned and slowly pushed himself to his feet, every muscle and bone in his body protesting. Harry limped over to one of the desks and collapsed into it.

“Why was that not like a real duel with Death Eaters?” Moody pressed, glaring at Harry.

“In a real Death Eater confrontation, the Bludgers would be replaced with Death Eaters who may all be firing spells at you at once,” Harry grated out, glaring back. He was tired, sore, and exasperated. Moody gave no mercy in his criticism, and compliments were almost nonexistent.

“That’s the problem with Death Eaters,” Moody continued, pacing back towards the front of the classroom. “They’re deceitful, sly, and cunning. Any decent wizard duel would only contain two wizards casting spells only at each other, but Voldemort’s followers are anything but decent. You’ll need all your wits about you if you ever have to duel with more than one Death Eater at once.”

Harry nodded, and listened carefully as Moody described some of his own duels with various Death Eaters during his time as an active Auror. Much as he detested the old codger sometime, Harry had to admit, Moody was good—really good. He had learned his stuff from experience—not just from books. Moody knew what he was doing.

And Harry didn’t.

He’d come to realize that he wasn’t nearly as skilled as he’d thought. Before the detentions with Moody, Harry had always thought of himself as a pretty decent dueller—if one passed over the pitiful excuse for a duel with Snape he’d had at the end of last year, on the night of Dumbledore’s death. And it was probably true that Harry was better than any of his classmates, but Moody had opened his eyes to the fact that when learning defense, one never truly arrives. It was a constant uphill struggle, learning how to properly defend oneself from the ever-changing Dark Arts.

Harry walked back to the Common Room, determined to get a start on his Transfiguration homework before his meeting with Sirius that night. Rounding a corner, he bumped smack into Demelza Robins, who was out of breath and looking like she’d just run all the way from the seventh floor to the second. Her bag split, and her books spilled out all over the floor.

Harry dove down to help her as she frantically gathered her books. He pulled out his wand and murmured a quick *Reparo* spell on her bag and helped her repack it.

"Thanks a million," Demelza said gratefully.

"Anytime," Harry replied, helping her to her feet. "What's the rush?"

"I'm late to my Potions class," she explained. "I've got to run... Oh, wait, Harry, did you see the game schedule? It's up!"

"Really?" Harry said with interest. He'd been waiting for weeks for the Quidditch match schedule to be posted. "Who are we playing first?"

"Slytherin," Demelza said with distaste.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Why am I not surprised? So, when's the match?"

"Three weeks. I'd love to chat, but Slughorn will be upset... Later!"

And she scurried away.

At eight-twenty, Harry left the Common Room, carrying his Invisibility Cloak and the Map. His head was aching from the essay he'd just written, not to mention the first years he'd had to separate from a vicious fight in the middle of the Common Room. That hadn't been too bad—it was the essay mostly that had given him the headache. *I should've paid more attention to Hermione in my fifth year*, Harry thought ruefully as he descended the white marble staircase and paused uncertainly in front of the double doors to the Great Hall. The entry was deserted.

Where was Sirius? Harry glanced at his watch. It was eight twenty-eight... His godfather wasn't late yet...

The seconds ticked by. Harry was beginning to feel impatient. He had homework to do, among other things. He glanced down at his watch again. Eight thirty-one. That was it. He half-turned to head back up the stairs, when something big and black collided with him.

Harry lost his balance and fell to the floor, throwing both his arms over his head as a shield. The big black thing was on top of him...it was...licking him?

Harry opened one eye to see an enormous black dog standing over him, its paws planted firmly on his chest, its tongue lolling happily out of its mouth. "*Sirius?*"

The dog responded by licking Harry's face. "Ewwwww..." Harry exclaimed. "Geroff me!"

Sirius jumped off obediently and transformed back into himself. He was howling with laughter. "Sorry, Harry, but you should've seen your face! It was absolutely hysterical..."

"I'm sure it was," Harry said darkly, sitting up and readjusting his askew glasses. Sirius didn't look sorry at all.

"You weren't even watching when I snuck up on you, were you?" Sirius continued, still laughing. He offered Harry a hand.

Harry stared at it suspiciously, then grasped his godfather's arm as if to accept his help up. A moment later, he had given a mighty tug, and Sirius was sprawled on the floor as well. Instantly, Harry transformed into his falcon form and flew at Sirius, flapping his wings and baring his talons and sharp beak. Sirius gave a yell of fear and scrambled away from the attack on all fours. Harry continued his assault, giving Sirius a few light scratches and pecks on his arms and face. Suddenly Sirius wasn't there anymore. Padfoot was there instead, his teeth bared. Harry gave a frightened squawk and took off, soaring towards the ceiling as Padfoot angrily snapped at his tail-feathers.

Harry landed atop the marble staircase and glared down at Padfoot, who transformed into Sirius. His godfather examined his cuts and scratches. "Bloody Hell, Harry, were you trying to kill me?" he complained, whipping out his wand and muttering a few healing spells over his abrasions.

"Just getting revenge," Harry said loftily, transforming back and lifting his chin.

"Yeah, well, it worked," Sirius muttered. "I'll never sneak up on you again."

"What'd you want, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Why did I want you to meet me here?"

"Yeah."

Sirius shot him a patronizing look that made Harry feel like he was three again. "You didn't figure it out by now?"

"No."

"You need some fun, so I was thinking...well, only if you want to... maybe we could go out in our Animagus forms like James and I used to while we were at Hogwarts."

He said the last line very quickly.

Harry stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"No, Harry, I'm your Mum using Polyjuice. Of course I'm Sirius! And serious, too," Sirius quipped. "So, is that a yes?"

In reply, Harry transformed and leapt off the banister. He soared down to where Sirius was standing, and transformed back.

"Of course I want too!" Harry said.

Sirius actually looked relieved. "Good! I was afraid there for a second you wouldn't want too..."

"So, where are we going?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Anywhere you want to," Sirius replied, grinning. "We could even head into Hogsmeade for a drink, if you like..."

"That sounds great!"

"Right, then. Ready, Harry?"

“Ready, Padfoot.”

Sirius frowned. “We really need to come up with a name for you...”

But Harry had already thrown open the oak doors and dashed out onto the grounds.

They spent hours roaming. Roaming, because there really wasn't a better word to describe it. They went to the greenhouses, the Whomping Willow, the Gamekeeper's hut, the Black Lake, and even ventured a little ways into the Forbidden Forrest. Anyone watching would have thought it an odd pair—a huge black dog loping along, and high above it, a black falcon with green eyes soaring, occasionally diving down to pester the dog, who playfully snapped back at it.

Harry had always loved flying, but something about this was different. He felt completely free. There was no broom beneath him, just fifty feet of nothing before the ground. He swooped and dove, enjoying the exhilarating rush he felt whenever he shot towards the ground.

“Show off,” Sirius called. He was sprawled in human form on a grassy slope at the edge of the Black lake.

In reply, Harry dive-bombed him, dropping like a rock. Sirius yelled and rolled out of the way just in time. Harry crashed into the soft ground beside him and transformed back, rolling with laughter.

“Sorry, Sirius...you should've seen...your face...” he howled gleefully. Sirius glared at him.

“I was thinking about offering to treat you to a drink at the Hog's Head, but now I'm thinking otherwise,” his godfather warned.

Harry put on a properly chastened look. “I'm sorry,” he said contritely. “Please, can we still go?”

Sirius grinned. “Just kidding, mate. Of course we can still go. Wanna race? One, two, three...” and instantly Sirius had transformed, and was running at full speed towards the castle gates.

“HEY! NO FAIR!” Harry yelled, before transforming and flapping his wings to take off. It took some time to get enough height, but soon he was flying after the black dog. Just out of the gates, he passed Padfoot up, and beat him to the Hog’s Head by at least five minutes. Harry transformed in the alley next to the pub and waited.

Finally the black dog appeared, sweating and panting. Sirius transformed back, and whacked Harry on the arm.

“What was that for?” Harry exclaimed. “I won, fair and square!”

“That’s for being a prideful git,” Sirius said. “Come on, let’s get inside.” Harry started towards the door, but suddenly Sirius called, “Wait!”

Harry turned. “Yeah?”

Sirius was looking him over, frowning slightly. “You could be recognized. Can’t you change your hair color or something?”

Harry concentrated, and a moment later, his hair had become light brown.

“Good, good, but not enough...”

A moment later Harry’s eyes were blue.

Sirius blinked. “You can change your eye color? Wow, Harry, that’s incredible. Not even Metamorphaguses can do that.”

Harry concentrated once more. When he opened his eyes, he had a beard.

Sirius keeled over laughing. “Hey,” Harry protested. “It makes me look older!”

“And you’ve obviously been practicing,” Sirius pointed out.

Harry reddened. “Let’s go,” he said quickly and headed towards the entrance of the Hog’s Head.

The interior was as he remembered it from the summer—gloomy, and dark—but the place was quite full. Harry paused, not sure where to sit or go, but Sirius led the way over to a corner table and whipped out his wand. “Scourgify,” he said, aiming his wand at the grimy table and seats. Instantly, they were clean. Sirius pocketed the wand, looking pleased.

“Sit.”

Harry obeyed, and a moment later, a frazzled waitress with a crooked nose and beady eyes appeared.

“Orders,” she snapped.

“Butter...” Harry began, but he was cut off by Sirius.

“Two Firewhiskys, please.”

The woman dually noted his order and left without a backwards glance.

“Sirius, I don’t...I mean, I’ve never had Firewhisky before!”

“Tonight’s the perfect time to start, then,” his godfather said, black eyes twinkling.

“Mum will have a fit,” Harry reminded him.

“*Lily* need never know,” Sirius said pointedly. “I’d prefer to keep all my limbs intact, thank you, so you’d better not breathe a word of this to her *or* James.”

“But my dad wouldn’t mind, would he?” Harry asked curiously.

Sirius grimaced. “Oh, he wouldn’t mind, but he’d probably kill me for not inviting him when you loose your ‘Firewhisky Virginity’ as we always called it.”

They were interrupted by the same waitress returning. She slapped two dirty bottles and empty goblets down on the table and held out a hand for the payment. Sirius dutifully handed her a small pile of

sickles. Once she was gone, he repeated the Scourgify spell on the goblets and bottles of Firewhisky.

“Cheers,” Sirius said, clinking his bottle with Harry’s before pouring a good deal of it in the goblet provided and draining it in one gulp.

Harry took a little more time with his. He poured a little into the goblet and took a small sip. Instantly his mouth and throat were on fire. Harry choked and flailed his arms as some of the fiery liquid shot out his nose. Sirius was laughing at him.

“It’s...not...funny...” Harry gasped, glaring back.

“Yes, it is,” Sirius insisted. “Go on, take another sip.”

Harry managed to choke down a third of the bottle before shoving the rest over to Sirius who looked only slightly put out that Harry couldn’t finish the whole bottle. His godfather cheerfully downed the rest of the bottle and ordered Harry a Butterbeer.

An hour later, Sirius and Harry were headed back to the castle. From high above, Harry noticed that Padfoot wasn’t quite running in a straight line; the black dog looked a little tipsy.

“Well, that was fun,” Sirius slurred as they transformed back on the front steps of Hogwarts and pushed open the oak doors. “Wanna do it again?”

Harry nodded eagerly. “Yeah! Sometime soon!”

Sirius swayed slightly. “Soon. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow...or the next day...or sometime...” He turned to head down the corridor towards the staff quarters, but suddenly stopped and turned back.

“You headed back to your dorm?”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Watch out for Filch...I should probably write you a note, but then they’d ask what on earth we were doing in the middle of the night...” Sirius frowned.

Harry laughed. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. They won't catch me." He pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and Marauders' Map and showed them to Sirius. His godfather probably wouldn't remember any of this in the morning.

Sirius's eyes widened. "Where...how..."

Harry smirked. "I found them in our attic."

Sirius nodded approvingly. "You're more like the Marauders than I thought," he said. "Well, I guess you'll be alright, so it's off to bed for me." And with that, he disappeared around the corner, still looking very dizzy.

Something bright was shining in his eyes. Harry groaned and pulled his pillow over his head. His head felt like it was splitting open and his mouth felt like something furry had died in it.

Suddenly someone was shaking him. "Harry! Harry, for heaven's sake, get up! You're going to be late to your classes." Slender fingers were prying the pillow from his face.

"Go'way..." Harry muttered, throwing an arm over his eyes to shield himself from the light.

"Come on, Harry! Stop being a prat." The same someone was shaking him again. Harry blindly swatted at the unwanted person, and the person emitted a squeal.

"Avada Kedabra..." Harry mumbled unconvincingly. "Avaba Ketavra...something like that..." He pulled the covers over his head and held them there.

Someone was giggling. Now they were pulling the covers off. Then there was a little gasp, and a choking sound. "Bloody hell. You're drunk!"

Harry opened one eye and saw a shocked-looking Leila leaning over him. "Am not," he slurred, squinting to keep the light out.

“Shut up, Harry, I know what drunk people look like. Where *were* you last night?”

“With Sirius,” Harry grated out, trying desperately to pull the covers back over his head.

Leila began to laugh again. It hurt Harry’s head. He abandoned the covers—it was a useless cause, because Leila had plopped herself atop the pulled back blankets—and instead opted to put his hands over his ears. “Ow...don’t laugh so loud... it hurts.”

She giggled again. “Sorry,” she said between laughs. “I never though...I’d see the day...my brother, drunk...”

“I’m NOT drunk!” Harry insisted. He tried to sit up to show her that he was perfectly, but he couldn’t quite manage it. His head reeled and he collapsed back on the pillows.

Leila looked him over, smirking. “Hang on, I’ll be right back,” she said, and darted from the room.

Harry pulled the covers over his head again and tried to block out every bit of light from his eyes which were hurting more than ever. *Finally, she’s gone.*

But in a moment, she was back, pulling his covers off again and shoving a vial in his hand. “Drink this,” Leila commanded.

Harry managed to sit up this time, swaying slightly. “What is this?” he asked skeptically, staring at the thick brown liquid in the bottle.

“It’s Anti-Hangover Potion,” Leila explained. “The seventh years always keep some in their dorm. I found this one under Lavender’s mattress, actually.”

“Does it work?”

“Yes, it works,” she said exasperatedly. “Just drink it.”

It was the worst stuff Harry had ever tasted in his life—worse than Polyjuice Potion and Skele-Gro combined—but it worked. Instantly,

his headache vanished and his throat cleared. "Wow...thanks..." Harry said, reaching for a cup of water to wash away the aftertaste. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine," Leila said, and Harry gave a yelp and jumped out of bed.

"Almost NINE? Why didn't you wake me up earlier?"

"Merlin's beard, Harry, I tried!" she said angrily. "It's your bloody fault for going out last night anyway. I'm just trying to help!"

Harry frantically threw his books together and pulled out some school robes. He felt a little ashamed for snapping at her. "Sorry, Leila, I didn't mean it. I've got to hurry...Clark will probably take fifty points from Gryffindor if I don't make it on time."

Leila sighed. "There's a couple pieces of toast for you on the plate by the door. I brought them from breakfast. I'll leave now so you can get dressed."

Harry quickly pulled on his school clothes and grabbed his bag, dashing out the door and down the stairway towards the Transfiguration classroom.

Author's Note: Well, this might be the last update for a while. Don't Avada Kedavra me *yet*, I said *might*, didn't I? My parents snooped around on my computer while I was at work and found out that I was spending all my time writing HP fanfiction. Needless to say they weren't very happy. (They think HP is satanic and evil... etc. etc.) So they confiscated the computer, which also included the last chapter and a half I wrote. I've got the rest stored online and in hard copy format, but I'll have to re-write the stuff I lost (which included a very good shouting scene...I'm crushed...) and post whenever I find time to go to the library and use the internet there. So sorry. But parents... Well, I'm sure some of you can sympathize.

This chapter was fun to write. Again, it's sort of a filler, setting up for the real action, which begins again in chapter 39. That's not to say there isn't important or interesting stuff in the next four chapters, at all... well, just read on.

OMG, 500 reviews!!!! Blimey! (as Ron would say) I love you guys!

Chapter 36

Harry made it to his Transfiguration class just in the nick of time. What he forgot to bring was his essay due that day.

Harry's face felt like it was on fire as Clark berated him for his forgetfulness, making many unfair accusations against Gryffindors in general, then taking away twenty house points.

It could've been worse, but Harry had to endure the glares of his classmates all through the lesson. By now the Gryffindors all knew that if they forgot to do an assignment, it was better just not to show up for class. Clark never said anything if Slytherins made mistakes, but if a Gryffindor did, well, all hell broke loose.

He was feeling quite depressed as he slipped into the seat next to Leila in the Great Hall for lunch. She looked up. "Hi, Harry," Leila said, though her mouth was full of mashed potatoes.

"Hey," he said dejectedly.

"What's the matter?"

"I got to class on time, but Clark took twenty points away because I forgot my essay, *and* she assigned me extra homework!"

"I'm sorry," she said sympathetically. "It was your fault, though."

"Sirius's fault," he corrected. "I didn't know he was going to take me all the ways to Hogsmeade."

"You went to Hogsmeade?" Jeremy suddenly said from across the table. "How?"

"Sirius took me," Harry explained. "Keep it down!"

Jeremy lowered his voice. "Cool. Did you go to the Hog's Head?"

Harry started to reply, but Leila cut in. "Yeah, and Harry got drunk on Firewhisky!"

“Are you serious? Ohhhh... that’s why you slept in this morning, Harry.”

Harry glared at his sister. “You just had to tell him, didn’t you?”

“And he had a whopper hangover this morning,” Leila continued, ignoring him.

“Cool!” Jeremy said, grinning and looking as if he’d have done anything for a chance to sneak off to Hogsmeade and drink Firewhisky in the middle of the night. “So,” the darker boy said, leaning closer and lowering his voice. “Have you thought about a way to get back at Ron yet?”

Harry smacked his head. “I completely forgot! Too much else going on, I suppose.”

Jeremy looked disappointed. “We’ve got to think of something, mate.”

“I know, I know. Listen, give me a couple days and I may have something.”

Jeremy didn’t look pleased, but he agreed.

As soon as Defence Against the Dark Arts class let out, Harry hurried to the Owlery to send a note to Fred and George. His short letter explained his need to get back at Ron for the Love Potions, and beseeched the twins to send him any good ideas they had for pranks. The reply was almost immediate.

We’d love to help you get revenge on Ickle-Ronnikins. That has been our fondest dream and most precious hope...

Cut the crap, George, Fred wrote. Just tell him what to do.

We’ll be sending you a package by owl full of, uh, goodies, George scrawled. Some of our own inventions are in there. We’ll include instructions for the...er, items.

It will be quite a large package, Fred continued. We won’t send it with the morning post; we’ll borrow Percy’s owl instead. The owl should

arrive tomorrow night around eight, so make sure you're in a place where no one important sees the package and gets suspicious, A.K.A., don't go hanging around Filch or McGonagall tomorrow night...

And it's all free of charge, George cut in. As long as you promise to send us a full written report of what you did and how Ron reacted. Anytime you need our help, just holler!

Harry grinned and tucked the letter away into a safe place. Tomorrow night, the fun would begin.

Eight o'clock found Harry ascending the stairs to the Owlery again. He had decided that the tower would be the best place to pick up the package; if he waited in the dorm or the Common Room, Ron might be there and recognize the owl that was sending Harry the box.

Only a few minutes later, the brown screech owl soared into the Owlery. "Hey, Hermes," Harry said softly. The owl dropped her package, then hooted and gave Harry a disdainful look before soaring back into the evening.

The box she had left was large, and Harry couldn't help feeling excited. What kind of evil prank devices had the twins thought up in this world? He wanted to rip into the box right now, but knew that someone could walk in any minute. So he restrained himself, and carrying the box carefully, headed down the stairs.

The Owlery was located at the top of the West Tower; the entrance to the stairway below was at the end of a long corridor that looped around the seventh floor and connected with the Gryffindor Portrait Hole. Harry hurried down the steps, lugging the box along. He was halfway to the Common Room when he heard someone running in his direction. Harry would've hidden—if he hadn't suddenly ran smack into Leila.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed as he picked himself off the floor. Harry had taken the blunt of the fall, partly because Leila had landed on top of him, and partly because he'd been trying

desperately not to hurt the package. Only Merlin knew what Fred and George could have put in there.

“Nothing!” she said unconvincingly. “What are *you* doing at the Owlry?”

“Nothing,” Harry replied back.

She looked him over suspiciously, her eyes falling upon the box Harry was holding defensively.

“Whatever’s in that box, I hope it’s not *illegal*,” Leila said, her lips pursed.

“Why?”

“Cause Filch is headed this way, idiot! Why do you think I was running?”

“Why were you running from Filch?” Harry asked, frowning. Then what she’d said registered. “He is? Now?”

“Yeah. He’s right around that corner. What’s in the box, anyway...”

But Harry had seized her arm and was dragging her down the corridor.

“Harry!” Leila gasped, trying to keep up. “You’re headed right toward him!”

Harry stopped in front of a long expanse of blank wall and began to pace.

Leila looked completely nonplussed. “Holy Mother of Merlin... Have you gone mad? Filch will be here any moment!”

Harry ignored her and concentrated on the task at hand. A second later, door had appeared in the wall.

“Wicked!” Leila said, awestruck, but Harry grabbed her and pulled her in.

Harry was pleased to find that he'd ended up in the same place as he had when he'd been trying to hide his Potions book. The room was as high as a cathedral, with large windows on either side. A city of junk, boxes, furniture, and other items rose above them.

"Where are we?" Leila asked in a whisper.

"The Room of Requirement," Harry explained. "Come on, let's go this way."

He led the way down the centre aisle. "It's a room that becomes whatever you need," he continued as they walked. "All you have to do is walk back and forth in front of it three times and think really hard about what you need. I discovered it in my fifth year when my friends and I formed the DA."

"Anything you need?" Leila asked, looking around at the piles of broken furniture, books covered in graffiti, banned joke items, and sinister weapons.

Harry nodded. "In my sixth year, it became a room to hide my Potions book. That's where I got the idea. We can hide the joke stuff here until it's safe to smuggle it back into the dorm. Ah, here we are."

He stopped in front of the large cupboard with the blistered surface, and pulled the door open.

"Eww," Leila said, wrinkling her nose as she caught a glimpse of the five-legged skeleton, but Harry was only half listening. He shoved the box inside and closed the doors again.

"Now no one will be able to find it," he said with a satisfied smile. "Let's get out of here."

"I want to look around," Leila protested.

"The stuff in here could be dangerous," Harry said. "OK, most of it's dangerous," he clarified, looking warily at some bottles filled with blood-red liquid, a stuffed bear's head that was snapping viciously at him, and a couple Fanged Frisbees.

“But Harry...”

“No! We’re leaving!”

“Filch is still out there,” Leila pointed out, and Harry’s hand immediately went to the inside pocket of his robe. With a sinking feeling, he realized that he’d left the Marauders’ Map in the dormitory.

“We’ve got to wait for Filch to leave anyway,” Leila said slyly. “A little peek wouldn’t hurt anything, would it?”

“It’s dangerous! I’m going back to wait by the door.”

“Fine, then! Be a prat!” Leila shouted. “You’re stupid, that’s what. You’ll take risks with Sirius, but not when I’m around!”

Harry turned on his heel and marched away, trying to ignore her raging. Suddenly something caught his eye...something silvery and white...

“Loathsome, fowl, evil, stuck-up git!” Leila continued. “Mean, despicable, arrogant... Bloody hell, Harry, I’m yelling at you! At least listen to me while I’m yelling at you!”

But Harry hardly heard her. He was staring, open-mouthed, at an old, tarnished tiara.

“Leila, do you see what I see?” he asked quietly.

She turned, and looked. And her mouth almost hit the floor. “Harry... is that... Is that what I think it is?”

Harry nodded. “I think we’ve just found another Horcrux.”

A half hour later, Moody, McGonagall, Sirius, Harry, and Leila were all crowded around the tiara. Moody’s wand was out, and he was performing the necessary diagnostic spells.

“Is it a Horcrux?” Leila asked eagerly. She had stayed in the Room of Requirement to make sure that when Harry arrived back with the Order members, the door would still be there.

Moody nodded. "I believe so. The diagnostics are show it's covered with dark magic."

But Sirius's eyes had narrowed. He was eying Leila suspiciously. "How'd you know about the Horcruxes?"

Leila and Harry immediately went red. "I...er...Well, you see..." Leila stumbled. Harry looked frantically at McGonagall and Moody, begging them with his eyes to intervene. *She was the first to know! I'm sorry! Help me!*

McGonagall coughed. "I'm sure it's only natural for Harry to confide in his sister, Sirius," she said quickly.

"Leila's trustworthy, so frankly, I'm not concerned that she knows of Order business," Moody growled.

Sirius still looked unconvinced, but fortunately, he let it go. "So, how're we going to get it to Regulus?" he asked.

"I'll levitate it into a metal box," Moody explained. "I don't think it's dangerous to touch, but we can't be too sure."

Moody fumbled around in his coat for a moment before extracting a box. He set about the task with McGonagall watching carefully. "What I don't understand," she finally said, "is why the Horcrux is here, of all places! I doubt even Voldemort knew of this room. I certainly didn't know, and to my knowledge, none of the other staff know either. It's not exactly the ideal place to hide a bit of one's soul, is it? Not up to his usual standards."

"Someone must have moved the Horcrux here," Harry said quietly.

She frowned. "Yes, that is the only solution that makes sense, but who?"

He shrugged. At that moment, Moody grunted. "I've found something else," he informed them, stowing the boxed Horcrux safely away in his pocket and holding up a scrap of paper. "This was beneath the Horcrux."

Harry groaned. "Not another note..."

"Please, read it, Alastor," McGonagall invited.

To Whom It May Concern:

Please immediately destroy the tiara to which this letter refers. The tiara is a dark object that can cause great harm if left intact. (Sirius snorted. "Dark object, indeed...") I know what it is, and I know what it can do, but I do not know how to destroy it, or I would have done the task myself.

I have brought the Horcrux to Hogwarts, because it was the only place I ever called home, and here resides the only man the Dark Lord ever feared. I pray that it will be discovered by the right person, and the task completed.

I know that I will die soon, but I do not fear death, even at the cruel hands of my husband and his so-called friends. They will be coming for me soon, and I shall await my fate with my head held high. I die satisfied, because I know that my life has not been in vain. To long I have lived in the shadows, listening to the Pureblood lies, and bowing to the Dark Lord's every whim. But I serve him no longer. Someday, someone will arise to defeat the Dark Lord, and hopefully my actions have smoothed their path a little. My only wish that one day my only son will make the same decision I have made, and at the crossroads of his life, he will take the path to the Light.

A.Y.

They stood in silence, contemplating the letter. "We have a few clues as to who she is," said Moody, scrutinizing the parchment. "A wife of someone who served Voldemort, probably Pureblooded, has one son, initials, A.Y."

"A.Y. may not be her real initials, though," McGonagall sighed. "'Y' may have stood for her maiden name."

"Do you think her husband was a Death Eater?" Harry asked.

"Most likely," Moody said.

“But if not,” Sirius cut in, “there are hundreds of possibilities. There are so many Purebloods in England, most of which are loyal to Voldemort, that it’d be impossible to track one with the initials A.Y. down. Especially one who lived over sixteen years ago.”

“How d’you know she wrote this note years ago?” Leila asked. “It could’ve been recently.”

“She mentioned Dumbledore,” Sirius said simply. “I can only guess that this took place before Voldemort fell.”

“At least we’ve found the Horcrux for this one,” McGonagall said fairly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Like the fact that we are in possession of the Horcrux will stop you, or my mum, or Felicia from searching for A.Y.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows shot up. “It never hurts to know,” she said defensively.

“Curiosity killed the cat, Professor,” Harry muttered, then realised what he’d said. McGonagall fixed him with one of her coldest glares that made a Dementor look positively cheerful, Sirius and Leila doubled over in laughter, and Moody cleared his throat several times.

“Sorry...didn’t mean it that way...” Harry sputtered, trying to suppress his own laughs. He suddenly wondered, albeit strangely, if Sirius had ever chased McGonagall while they were in their Animagus forms. This made him want to laugh even more, so he shoved it into the back of his mind and made a mental note to tell Leila later—she’d think it was funny.

Author’s Note: You won’t believe me, but I swear to God, I wrote this chapter a week before Deathly Hallows came out. Promise. I thought about rewriting the chapter so the Horcrux was hidden somewhere else, but I already had the backstory of how the Horcrux got there planned. So why fix what isn’t broken?

Chapter 37

“Do you ever stop eating?” Leila said. She and Harry were at breakfast several days later, and fortunately she was addressing Jeremy instead of Harry.

“Why should I?” he said, though his words were barely distinguishable through a mouthful of blueberry muffin.

“Well, if you don’t stop soon, you’ll be as big as a whale,” she said primly. “Pass the salt.”

“Not to you, not after you’ve just insulted me!” Jeremy exclaimed. Harry was very glad his friend had remembered to swallow first.

“Fine. It’s not by you anyway. Harry?”

Harry passed her the salt, grinning at their playful banter. For two people who used to be going out, Leila and Jeremy certainly didn’t act the ways exes normally acted—hurt, betrayed, or bitter. But Harry was more occupied with watching Ron out of the corner of his eye. Though Jeremy continued his conversation with Leila, Harry knew his friend was also taking subtle glances at the red-head.

Ron was laughing at something Lavender said... now he was eating his bacon... a Ravenclaw was passing and Ron was winking at her... he was reaching for his goblet of pumpkin juice...

Harry held his breath. Jeremy stopped what he was saying mid-sentence and stared as well.

Leila looked back and forth from Harry to Jeremy with a confused expression on her face. “What is up with you two?”

“Shhh!” Jeremy hissed. “I want to see this!”

Ron lifted his goblet and took a long draught. He set it back down. A Ravenclaw prefect walked by and asked Ron if he’d be in the library later. Ron turned, grinned, and said, “Do you want to snog me in the broom cupboard?”

The girl looked confused. "Ronald? What did you just ask me?"

Ron's eyebrows furrowed. "Do you want to snog me in the broom cupboard?"

Harry and Jeremy dissolved into muffled laughs. Leila's eyes widened. "No," she breathed. "You didn't..."

By now Terry Boot had come over. "Ron? Are you feeling alright?"

Ron looked angry. "Do you want to snog me in the broom cupboard?" he said, his face growing red.

Harry laughed again at the shocked expression on Terry's face. Suddenly he felt a blow land on his arm.

"You prat!" Leila squealed. "You spiked his drink!"

"Actually, Jeremy did," Harry said, grinning at her.

"Where'd you get the Repeating-Phrase Potion?" she said. "I know for a fact Slughorn doesn't waste time brewing it, and it's really complicated..."

Jeremy wiggled his eyebrows. "Ask us no questions, we'll tell you no lies."

Fortunately for Ron, and to Harry's and Jeremy's disappointment, it only took a few minutes for the Ravenclaws to figure out the problem. They told Ron not to say anything else, then dragged him off to the Hospital Wing for some counteracting potions. Ron went willingly, shooting glares at Jeremy and Harry over his shoulder.

"That was marvelous!" Jeremy exclaimed once Ron had left.

"Yeah," Harry said, laughing.

Leila was still trying to look disapproving, but Harry could see the corners of her mouth were twitching.

"So, the Marauders strike again," someone said jovially from behind Harry.

“Hey, Sirius,” Harry greeted his godfather.

“That wasn’t a bad prank,” Sirius continued. “James and I pulled that one on McGonagall in our fourth year.”

“*What?*” Leila exclaimed. “What did she say?”

“She said, ‘I have on a pink thong,’ for the entire noon meal,” Sirius said. “Hey, Harry, I was wondering, d’you want to meet me at eight again tonight?”

“I’ve got Quidditch practice,” Harry said regretfully. “How about tomorrow night?”

“Done,” Sirius said, slapping Harry’s back. “I’ll see you there.”

The first Quidditch game was speeding closer. Despite being so busy, Harry was still able to find time to go on midnight adventures with Sirius. These opportunities, however, became farther and farther apart as 15 November neared. The Quidditch team was now hogging the pitch whenever the Slytherins weren’t practicing. Besides that, with Christmas just around the corner, the professors were beginning to give out monstrous amounts of homework. On top of practices, homework, detentions, prefect duties, and nighttime strolls with his godfather, Harry was having to watch his back constantly.

Needless to say, Jeremy’s and Harry’s first retaliatory on Ron had been a smashing success, but now the three were involved in an all-out prank war. Harry and Jeremy had gone back to their dorm that night, congratulating themselves on their—or Fred’s and George’s—brilliance, only to find that their beds had been jinxed to feel like beds of nails as soon as they laid down.

It was no problem, really, because Harry just slipped Jeremy out of the Gryffindor tower under the Invisibility Cloak. The Room of Requirement provided two nice beds, and even decorated itself in Gryffindor colours for the boys. The tricky part turned out to be getting the jinxes removed. The next day, it took the combined efforts of Harry, Jeremy, Leila, Melissa, and Daphne Greengrass, who was

particularly good at Charms, before the beds were finally comfortable to lie on again.

The next day, Ron was plagued by singing valentines that were all signed by Millicent Bulstrode, though the Slytherin girl swore up and down she'd *never* sent the notes.

"We're fighting a losing battle," Harry said dejectedly as he and Jeremy walked back to the Gryffindor Common Room one evening. They'd just been to see Madam Pomphrey for the fourth time that week, having each grown six-inch long donkey ears. Harry had to admit—the Ravenclaws were creative. It had taken the school nurse over an hour to sort out exactly which hexes had been used to give Harry and Jeremy the ears.

"Yeah," Jeremy said, kicking at an old set of armor as they passed by. "I mean, we've got Fred and George behind us, and they're the most brilliant pranksters in the history of Hogwarts." Harry disagreed, thinking of the Marauders, but he said nothing. "But Ron," his friend continued, "he's got the entire Ravenclaw house behind him!"

Harry sighed. He knew it was true; he had seen Ron surrounded by Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Mandy Brocklehurst, and the other seventh year Ravenclaws in the library, pouring over books and whispering excitedly, occasionally throwing sinister looks over at Harry and Jeremy.

But whether it had come from Harry's rescuing Ginny from Azkaban, inviting Ron to be on the team, or the pretty impressive pranks Ron had endured, there was one thing different about Ron now that Harry really appreciated. Ron was actually showing him respect. They didn't talk much, but Ron never contradicted him at Quidditch practices, or even made sarcastic comments any more. Harry had a feeling that even the prank war was now just simply good fun. Ron never even seemed angry when he became the victim of Harry's and Jeremy's latest prank.

"Password?" the Fat Lady asked primly, interrupting Harry's thoughts.

"Romance," Jeremy said darkly, and the Fat Lady sighed dramatically, throwing one hand to her head in what she must have that looked like

a damsel-in-distress pose. Harry just rolled his eyes. The Fat Lady had fallen in love a few weeks earlier with a knight three paintings over and one painting up. Since then, she had been a hopeless romantic and all the passwords had been related in some way to her latest fad.

Harry followed his friend into the Common Room. "Are you going to bed?" he asked when Jeremy headed for the stairs.

Jeremy turned, incredulous. "Are you joking? We've got Transfiguration and Potions tomorrow. And Darryl assigned twenty-two pages of translation. I'm just going upstairs to get my books."

"I'll join you," Harry said, thinking he'd be lucky if he got his revising done before midnight.

Two hours later, the candles were burning low, and Harry had finished Transfiguration and was just starting on Potions. Leila still hadn't come in, and he'd already checked with one of his sister's dorm mates that she wasn't in the dorm. "Merlin's beard, where is she?" Harry muttered.

"Relax, mate, she can take care of herself," Jeremy said, not looking up from the Runes translation he was labouring over.

"Easy for you to say! It's not your sister who's been sneaking out every night," Harry shot back.

Jeremy grinned sheepishly. "Too right. But I'm sure she'll be OK."

Harry turned back to his homework, but he couldn't get Leila off his mind. Where was she? What was she doing? What did she have to hide? Was she in danger? This wasn't the first time she'd snuck off. In fact, almost every night they didn't have Quidditch practice, Leila was missing from the Common Room; every night she claimed she'd been doing detention, or studying in the library, or talking to a teacher, or hanging out with Luna, but Harry knew he was missing something. How could he be sure she was safe?

Suddenly he remembered.

"I am such an idiot," Harry muttered to himself as he bounded up the stairs to the seventh years' dormitory. "Lumos," he whispered, creeping along the beds, trying not to wake his dorm-mates. Harry quietly opened his trunk and fished around in it. Finally he found what he was looking for. Underneath the Invisibility Cloak, Azkaban book, and the letter to his Mum he'd found in the attic, he grasped the Marauders' Map.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," Harry panted, tapping the wand, once he'd reached the Common Room again. He threw the map on the table.

The lines appeared, and Jeremy and Harry leaned over it. "Don't you think this is spying?" Jeremy asked skeptically.

"Nah, I'm just making sure she's OK, that's all," Harry replied.

They searched the map, but to no avail. "She's not on the map," Jeremy declared.

"She has to be," Harry insisted. "Look again!"

But Leila was no where to be seen.

"She must have gone to Hogsmeade," Jeremy stated.

"Yeah," Harry mumbled. But the question was still lingering on his mind: *Why?* What was his sister hiding?

By the time the two went to bed, Leila was still not back, nor had she showed up on the map.

"So, where do you want to go tonight?" Sirius asked.

"I don't really care," Harry said honestly. He and Sirius had met once again in the entry way.

Sirius cocked an eyebrow. "You don't?"

Harry shook his head. It had been a long, stressful day, and all he wanted to do was fly; it'd be nice to leave his problems on the ground.

"Anywhere it is, then," said Sirius, grinning. "Should I lead, or you?"

"You'd better lead," Harry said seriously. "If I lead, you'll be left in the dust."

Harry made the fastest transformation and take off in his life to avoid the blow his godfather aimed at his shoulder.

The night air was cool and crisp. October had been relatively warm, but with the first week of November had come the cold northern wind and icy rains. Harry was glad that this night was clear. He wasn't at all cold; layers of thick protective feathers protected him from the harsh wind. Instead of fighting the stiff currents of air, Harry let them carry him, and used his wings for direction. He soared in high, lazy circles around the large black dog below.

Harry flew a bit ahead, swooping down around the Herbology greenhouses. He was about to double back to let Padfoot catch up, when he suddenly spotted movement inside one of long, glass-covered structures. The Hogwarts greenhouses were magically heated and lighted year round, and as Harry got closer, he could make out the shadows of two people inside. He quickly looped around and landed next to Padfoot, who had stopped on the crest of a little hill and was sniffing the air.

Harry transformed, suddenly shivering against the wind. He pulled his jumper close, glad he'd thrown it on before he'd left the tower.

"There're two people in the first greenhouse," he informed his godfather.

Padfoot sniffed once more, then transformed. He looked anxiously in the direction Harry had just flown from. "Let's turn around," Sirius said tensely. There was something in his voice Harry couldn't read. "How about a Firewhiskey at the Hog's Head?"

Harry suddenly had the strange suspicion that Sirius was trying to keep him away from the greenhouses for a reason. His godfather

usually would have been the first to dash in as Padfoot on the unsuspecting people and plant his muddy paws on their robes, barking excitedly.

“Why? It’s probably just a couple Hogwarts students who snuck out to check on their Herbology gardens,” Harry said. “They won’t even recognize us if we run by.”

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. “They might recognize me. It might be teachers.”

Now Harry was really suspicious. “You’re an unregistered Animagus! How would they recognize you?”

His godfather shrugged, unwilling to answer the question. “Harry, please...let’s just leave.”

“I’m going to fly above,” Harry said, eyeing Sirius. “They won’t recognize me. I just want to see who it is.”

Before Sirius could protest, Harry transformed and leapt into the air. He gained altitude and soared over the glass greenhouses. Harry could easily make out the long rows of magical plants and fungi. Near the end of the rows was a section blocked off and surrounded by signs that read, “Come no closer!” and “Danger!” Inside the gated square grew the really dangerous plants like the Man-Eating Mango Tree, and the Deadly Dandelion.

The two people were in the very center of the greenhouse, and it was obvious that they weren’t professors, and they definitely weren’t there to check their gardens. It looked more like they were checking out each other. The two were standing far too close to be just talking, anyway. They were passionately snogging.

Harry angled a little closer, curious as to who the people were. When he got a good look at their faces, however, he nearly crashed into the side of the greenhouse.

It was Leila.

Her lips were glued to a tall, stringy boy with dark brown hair...and a green and silver crest on his robes.

Theodore Nott was snogging his sister.

Author's Note: The prank war was really fun to write about. The plot thickens... Get ready for a large-scale shouting scene! Now we know where Leila's been going, huh?

I've finally caught up with myself, I think. Anyway, I don't have the next chapter completely finished, but I think I'll have it up by tomorrow.

Please review! I love reviews.

Chapter 38

Theodore Nott was snogging his sister.

Snogging wasn't quite the word, though—it looked more like they were making out. Nott's robes were open at the front, his white school shirt unbuttoned nearly to the waist. Leila's school robes were draped over a nearby bench, and her shirt looked strangely rumpled, as if Nott's hands had already been inside of it. There were purple blotches on her neck.

As Harry watched, Nott's hands slid under Leila's shirt once again, and Leila attacked his mouth with even more ferocity. And suddenly Harry was filled with a kind of rage he'd never before experienced. That was *his sister* that *snake* was touching.

Harry had forgotten about Leila's confession to writing Nott during the summer. He recalled it now, along with her threat to tell his parents about the Aperio. But Harry didn't care about that anymore. All he wanted to do was get that son of a Death Eater away from his sister and beat him up. Or kill him. Maybe both.

Harry swooped towards the door. Sirius had guessed what Harry was about to do, and was running towards the greenhouse as Harry transformed back.

"Harry...don't..."

But Harry ignored him and bolted through the door and towards the couple. Neither looked up; they were too busy engrossed with each other and hadn't heard him come in...

"GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY SISTER!" Harry bellowed.

Leila and Nott jumped apart as if they'd been hit by lightning.

Harry headed for Nott, who shrank back, fear flickering in his eyes. Pulling back his arm for a mighty blow to Nott's nose, he swung...

“PROTEGO!” someone screamed, and Harry felt himself flying back. He landed in the dirt, crushing several Poisonous Poppies as he fell. In a second, though, he had scrambled to his feet once more, drawing his wand. Nott had his wand out too and was leering at Harry, almost daring him to cast the first curse.

Leila was standing between them, her wand pointed to the spot where both boys had been a moment before. Her face was furious. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Sirius crash through the door and skid to a stop, looking like a deer caught in headlights.

Leila was wavering, unsure of whom to point her wand at. She finally decided on Harry.

“Stay away from my sister,” Harry growled, and red sparks shot out of the end of his wand.

Nott paled, but continued to glare back. “You must be blind, Potter, ‘cause in case you didn’t notice, she was kissing me back.”

Harry would have thrown a hex at him right then—he already had a whole list of them in his mind that he wanted to use—but Leila was keeping him in check. Jeremy had spoken almost reverently of Leila’s spectacular Furnunculus curses.

“Sneaking out like this...with my sister...you’re dead, Nott,” Harry shot at him. Maybe if he Petrificus Totalised Leila, then he could kill the awful Slytherin. No, that wouldn’t work, Sirius was behind him. On the other hand, maybe his godfather would help him kill Nott and come up with a good idea as to where to hide the body. Harry snuck a quick glance at Sirius, and his hopes failed. Sirius was looking uncertainly from Harry, to Nott, then to Leila, and back to Harry.

“Your sister was the one who suggested our meeting here,” Nott said coolly, but Harry could see his hands shaking. For good reason, too; Harry’s spectacular Defence Against the Dark Arts skills had become well known throughout Hogwarts.

“Liar!” Harry yelled. “You have no right... Keep your dirty Pureblood hands off my sister or...”

“Or what, Potty?” the Slytherin said. “You’ll stutter at me?”

“Or you’ll wish you’d never been born to your filthy Death Eater parents,” Harry spat.

“Don’t talk about my parents.”

Nott’s voice was deadly soft. Harry laughed bitterly. “Why? Are you ashamed of the truth? I’d have thought you’d be proud to have parents who serve Voldemort...bowing like puppets to his every whim.”

“Shut up.”

“Aren’t you a Death Eater too? I heard Voldemort’s been recruiting. Did you think a nice Dark Mark tattoo would go nice with your hair colour?”

“I said, shut up!”

“Well, I *know* your father’s a Death Eater... He probably does Voldemort’s dirty work for him, doesn’t he? Torturing Muggles, killing off Muggle-borns, fighting Aurors... But that’s all in the job description, isn’t it?”

“Harry...” Leila cut in, her voice pleading. Harry ignored her.

“What about your mummy? She’s probably got a Dark Mark too... Even if she’s not, I bet she hangs around your mansion, inviting all her Pureblood friends over for tea and simpering in her wealth... Does she know you like my sister? You didn’t tell her, huh? She’d probably murder you; I’ve heard half-bloods have contagious diseases, you know. If she only knew...”

“SHUT UP ABOUT MY MUM!” Theodore Nott suddenly bellowed, and Harry had to dodge a spell that suddenly burst from the Slytherin’s wand.

“Why? It’s such an intriguing conversation,” Harry said sarcastically. He wanted to push Nott to the breaking point...he wanted a duel. “What else does your dear Death Eater mum do all day long? Cower

in a corner whenever Voldemort drops by? She's probably just like all the other Death Eaters... She isn't capable of thinking for herself..."

"My mother is DEAD!" Nott shouted, and Harry froze.

He stared back at Nott, who was shaking now, and very red in the face, his wand still pointed directly at Harry's heart. Harry was surprised that the Slytherin hadn't lost control yet...

But those words...*My mother is dead*... They pulled at something inside of him, because he knew how it felt, to have lost parents, and have people insult them. Aunt Marge's hateful words came crowding back into his mind: "Your sister was a bad egg... Then she ran off with a wastrel... A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger..."

Harry pushed every bit of remorse and compassion he had momentarily felt for Theodore Nott out. This bloke had just been snogging his sister... his father had attacked Harry and his friends in the Ministry. There was no way Harry was going to feel sorry for Nott. He deserved anything he got.

"Your mum is dead? Pity...think of all the Muggles she could be attacking right now... all the work for the Dark Lord she could be doing..."

"Harry, SHUT UP!" someone screamed.

But it wasn't Theodore. Leila's eyes were wide and furious, and she had darted right in between the two seventh years...right into the line of fire...

"Leila, get out of the way!" Harry yelled.

"Silencio!" she yelled, and the spell hit Harry before he could block it. Leila took a few breaths, still looking at her brother. "Shut up, OK? SHUT UP!"

She turned to Nott.

"Theodore..."

“Don’t talk to me.”

“No, Theodore...I need to know something...” she was pleading with him. Harry tried desperately to counter the Silencio charm, but he had always had a hard time with that particular nonverbal spell. He wanted to send a good Sectumsempra spell at Nott, but Leila was still in the way.

Nott wavered, but then he took a step closer to Leila. She met him in the middle ground, still pointing her wand at Harry. “Theodore...tell me something...are you a Death Eater?”

Nott looked at her, then to Harry, then back at Leila. “No.”

“Tell me one more thing...it’s really important! How...how did your mother die?”

Nott froze. His eyes flickered with fear, and suddenly Harry was intrigued. What was Leila doing? Did she think there was something important surrounding the unknown circumstances of Nott’s mother’s death?

“She died in childbirth,” Nott said quickly. And unconvincingly.

“Tell me the truth,” Leila whispered, her eyes wide and beseeching.

“Not with those two here,” the boy snarled. He gestured towards Harry and Sirius.

“Please...” Leila said again, putting a hand on his shoulder. “They don’t matter. I need to know.”

“Fine,” he spat, after a long pause. “My father killed her.”

Leila gasped, her eyes wide. Sirius was staring at Nott as if he’d never seen him before. And the pieces were beginning to fall into place in Harry’s mind...

Finite Incantatem, Harry thought forcefully, and suddenly he could speak again. “You saw her die,” he stated, and Nott suddenly looked scared again. But he didn’t try to deny it.

Harry remembered the Care of Magical Creatures class during his fifth year when Hagrid had taught them about Thestrals. He and Neville had been able to see the skeleton-like horses, along with one other stringy Slytherin bloke... Theodore Nott.

"Why?" Leila whispered.

"I don't know," Nott said harshly.

"How did she die?"

"They tortured her for days, and then my father used the Avada Kedavra."

"Why?" Leila said again.

Nott kicked at an old bucket. "I don't know, alright? I just don't know! My father always told me that she was a traitor and she deserved to die like that, but I don't know what she did."

There was a long silence. Then Leila spoke. "What was her name?"

"Aurelia. Aurelia Nott."

"What was her maiden name?"

Nott looked long and hard at Leila before replying. "Yaxley."

Pandemonium broke out. Leila threw her arms around Nott and he stumbled back. "Your mother was A.Y.!" she cried happily.

Sirius appeared by Harry's side. "Sirius! Did you hear?" Harry said excitedly and his godfather nodded, a huge grin spreading over his face.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Sirius said to Nott, shaking his hand.

Poor Theodore Nott looked completely bewildered... *Well, I would too, if I were right in the middle of a shouting match with my girlfriend's brother and then suddenly they all start acting weird and half-way friendly towards me*, Harry thought. He hastened to explain.

"We found a note your mum wrote right before she died," he said to Nott.

The Slytherin's expression turned from confused to completely shocked. "You *did*? Where?"

"In the Room of Requirement," Sirius answered.

For some strange reason, Nott didn't even ask what the Room of Requirement was. Had Leila told him? Then suddenly it hit Harry.

"Oh... How could have I been so stupid?" he groaned. "*That's* where Leila's been going every night."

Sirius looked confused, but Leila and Nott exchanged glances. "Been watching me on the Marauders' Map, have you?" Leila said, narrowing her eyes.

"I didn't know where you went! I was stupid. I forgot that people didn't show up on the Map if they were in the Room of Requirement."

"And you let that little hint slip when you told me..." Leila trailed off. Harry was glad she didn't continue; he'd told her that fact when he explained how Malfoy had used the room to plan his pathetic attempts on Dumbledore's life.

"So you've been meeting him in the Room of Requirement all this time..." Harry said, feeling a little of his anger come back.

"Not all the time," Leila said defensively. "Not until you showed it to me...before we just did the broom closet thing..."

"What did you do in broom closets?" Harry growled, not sure if he wanted to know. Now he really wanted to kill Nott... They'd been meeting for weeks—months probably—and he hadn't known.

"That's not important," Nott said quickly, glancing nervously at the red sparks that were bursting from Harry's wand at intervals. "I want to see this letter my mum wrote."

"It's in my office," Sirius said suddenly. "I'll show it to you now, if you want."

It was an odd procession that made their way back up to the castle. Sirius led the way, followed by Leila and Nott who walked together, and Harry coming behind, keeping an eye on the couple. They were fortunate not to meet Filch or Mrs. Norris on the way up, but as they rounded a corner on the fourth floor, they ran into Professor McGonagall, clutching her old tartan dressing gown around her and holding her lit wand high.

"Good lord. What are you all doing up at this time of night?" she demanded, looking at Sirius coldly over her glasses.

"Not important, Minerva," Harry's godfather said quickly. "We've just discovered who A.Y. is," he added in a lower voice.

McGonagall's eyes widened. "Really?" she breathed, glancing at Sirius's followers. Her eyes rested on Nott for just a moment before she nodded and let Sirius lead the way to his office.

Once they were situated in Sirius's office, which was painted red and gold and had Quidditch posters all over the walls, Theodore Nott was given the letter. Leila kept her hand on his shoulder as he read it.

"What is the object she spoke of?" Nott said once he'd finished. His jaw kept twitching, but he locked eyes with McGonagall.

She shifted uncomfortably. "I can't tell you exactly why it was important, but I will say that it was a tiara which used to belong to Rowena Ravenclaw herself."

"So she didn't die in vain," Nott said softly, looking down at his lap.

"No, she didn't," McGonagall said firmly. "I am not exaggerating when I say that what your mother did is probably one of the bravest and most crucial steps anyone has ever taken towards securing Lord Voldemort's downfall. Because of what she did, many lives will be saved."

Harry thought he could see a hint of smile on Nott's face. He was beginning to feel a little warmer toward the dark-haired Slytherin, but he still didn't like the way Leila's fingers were now massaging Nott's shoulders.

"The time has come for us to take sides," McGonagall continued softly. "Voldemort is only gaining power, and if we do nothing to prevent it, he will take away everything we hold dear."

Nott nodded, still not looking at her.

"You have said you're not a Death Eater," Sirius broke in from the corner, and McGonagall's face relaxed a bit.

"Just not having the Dark Mark is still not proof of loyalties, though," she continued, looking straight at Nott. "So I am forced to ask directly, Mr. Nott. Where do your loyalties lie?"

There was a long silence. Then Nott looked up and met her eyes. "I will never serve the Dark Lord," he said firmly. "My father has been pressuring me for some time to become a Death Eater, but I will never do so. I can't..." He swallowed hard. "I can't join Father...not after seeing him murder her...and especially not now that I know why Mum died."

McGonagall looked at him long and hard. "You're certain, Mr. Nott?"

Nott took a deep breath. Harry could hear the seconds ticking away on the clock on Sirius's desk. "I'm sure."

Harry walked back to the tower with his sister, who was clutching an excuse signed by McGonagall just in case they met Filch.

"Um, Leila?" Harry said tentatively. She did not reply. Harry sneaked a glance at her. She was staring straight ahead, her jaw set.

Harry inwardly groaned. *Oh Merlin...*

"Leila..."

“What?” she snapped.

Harry’s stomach sank. “I’m...sorry...” he finally blurted out. “I was a real prat, bursting in like that and trying to beat him up...”

“Yeah, you were,” she acknowledged stiffly.

“I shouldn’t have said those things either,” Harry continued. “I just... I felt...” He struggled for a moment, trying to find the right words. A memory flashed into his mind; a memory of him and Ron catching Ginny snogging Dean behind the tapestry and how angry Ron had been. Ron had looked like he wanted to tear Dean limb from limb.

“I just felt so angry,” Harry continued haltingly. “I mean, you...and him...”

“Just what I need, a super over-protective older brother invading my life,” Leila said, tossing her head. But she didn’t look quite so mad anymore.

“I was being just like Dad,” Harry mumbled. “Judging people before ever giving them a chance.”

“Too right,” she said.

“And I’m sorry.”

Leila didn’t speak for a while. They climbed the last stairway to the seventh floor and ducked through a narrow doorway into a shortcut to the Common Room.

“I forgive you,” Leila finally said as they approached the portrait hole. “But I’m still going to be mad at you for a while. Just to make me feel better.”

“Er, OK,” Harry said, not quite sure of what she meant.

“Starting now,” she informed him, then gave the Fat Lady the password and stormed through the portrait hole, leaving Harry standing alone and feeling very bewildered.

True to her word, Leila didn't speak to him for the entire week preceding the first Quidditch game. Some of the Gryffindors were very curious as to why the seemingly inseparable siblings were now ignoring each other pointedly. Jeremy had different feelings.

"It's about time you two had a row," he said the next day at breakfast, slapping Harry's back. "The two of you were entirely too nice to each other for siblings. It's just not natural."

Quidditch practices were rather awkward. Harry spoke to Leila when he had to—he was Captain, after all, and he avidly refused to let personal feuds come before the team. But it did sound strange to hear Leila shouting, "Demelza, tell that idiotic brother of mine that I was passing the Quaffle! He's blind as a Vampire at noon!"

Demelza would faithfully repeat what Leila had said, until Harry finally yelled, "I heard her the first time!"

Every night Leila was free, she would slide out of her chair at eight o'clock, take her books to her dormitory, and slip out of the Common Room, but not before throwing Harry a grin and wink. He knew where she was going, and he tried not to think about his sister tangled in the arms of Theodore Nott, Slytherin. At least she hadn't fallen in love with Draco Malfoy...

The next Order meeting was scheduled the evening before the match. Harry left Jeremy in charge of the team's practice. He knew Jeremy would do a good job, but it would also infuriate Leila, who secretly wanted to be Quidditch Captain once Jeremy and Harry had graduated.

When Harry arrived at Grimmauld Place, most of the Order members had already arrived, including Luzita Clark. The Transfiguration professor was bustling around the nearly-full living room, introducing herself and chatting amiably with everyone she met. Harry saw Moody standing in the corner, watching Clark carefully with both eyes. Harry waded through the crowds towards the old Auror.

"Hey, Professor," he greeted Moody.

Moody grunted and nodded in return.

“Does she have the Mark?” Harry asked softly out of the corner of his mouth.

Moody shook his head quickly. “I probably shouldn’t be sharing this with a student, but you’re not the average student, are you, Potter?”

Harry suppressed a grin. In the corner, Clark was now deep in conversation with Molly Weasley. The latter seemed to be telling a story; she was waving her hands and talking expressively.

“I’ve checked everything—background, family history, occupational records, every listing for Clark or Putnam—that’s her mother’s maiden name—the Wizengamot has tried in the last two hundred years, but she’s clean. There is no reason in the world not to trust her, but every time she’s around, my Auror senses go on high.”

“Have you checked to make sure she’s not under Polyjuice?” Harry asked.

“She’s not. I already ran some tests.”

“Under the Imperious Curse?”

“Again, no.”

“She’s acting,” Harry observed. Now Clark was embracing Kiara with a large smile on her face. “She’s not nearly that pleasant at school.”

“She is when Minerva and I are around,” Moody said.

“Not with students, though,” Harry insisted. “She’s everyone’s least favourite teacher. She hates Gryffindors, and she’s always favoring Slytherins.”

Moody turned his head and focused his non-magical eye on Harry. “What’s so wrong about that, Potter?” he growled. “I was in Slytherin.”

Harry gaped at him. “I...er...you...” he stammered.

Fortunately he was saved from having to reply by Sirius calling, "Listen up, people, let's begin!"

For the most part, the meeting was boring. Sirius told the Order about how Harry had found Ravenclaw's tiara (leaving out the fact that Leila had been there as well). Regulus said he'd gotten the diary and the ring destroyed, and had made a good start on breaking the enchantments surrounding the tiara. Mundungus Fletcher reported his attempts and failures of convincing any of the newest Death Eater recruits to consent to spy for the Order. "They were too scared of You-Know-Who," he said. "Of course, I Obliviated them once they said no."

As the Order had a long discussion regarding ways to infiltrate Death Eater circles, Harry found himself wishing he were back at Hogwarts on his broom...

Fred elbowed him, then gave a long, comical yawn. Harry grinned.

"I'm missing Quidditch Practice," he whispered.

Both twins looked sincerely sympathetic. "That's awful, mate," George said.

"Thanks for the box," Harry said softly. "We've made good use of its contents.

They both were delighted. "What did you do..." Fred started, but cut off when he noticed Mrs. Weasley glaring at them.

"I'll owl you later," Harry promised, and Fred nodded.

Harry turned his attention back to the meeting. Now the attendees were discussing how to destroy Nagini. Clark was listening intently, and a few times she made comments or suggestions. Harry noticed that he and Moody weren't the only people watching Clark—McGonagall was keeping a sharp eye on the new Transfiguration teacher as well.

Harry was very glad when the meeting adjourned. He wanted to get back to the Gryffindor Common Room and see how the practice had gone. The team had been working on some complicated new plays...

He hardly noticed when his mother kissed him goodbye.

Author's Note: I am officially caught up with myself. Now your waits will be waiting for me to write a chapter rather than post it...

So now you know who A.Y. was. I thought about making you wait another twenty chapters or so, but figured you'd waited so long for the third person in the Aperio...I'm not that mean. By the way, the third person is revealed in chapter 40. Which I haven't finished writing yet either. Hopefully I'll get 39 and 40 up before I leave on a two-week vacation on Wednesday.

Hope you liked this chapter! Next chapter I get to try my hand at some Quidditch scenes. The title? "Triumph and Tragedy."

Please review! We're getting close to 600!

Chapter 39

The eleventh of November dawned cool and clear. Harry was up before dawn, the usual pre-match nerves making it impossible for him to sleep any more. When he reached the Common Room, Leila was there, waxing her broomstick, her Quidditch robes slung over the back of a nearby chair.

"You couldn't sleep either?" she asked, looking up.

Harry cocked one eyebrow at her. "So now you're speaking to me again?"

She shrugged. "It's been a week, hasn't it? Long enough, if you ask me. I think you've learned your lesson."

Harry choked. "Learned my *lesson*?"

Leila shot him an innocent smile. "You know what I mean. So, why aren't you still drooling on your pillow?"

Harry sighed and slumped down into an armchair. "Couldn't sleep anymore. I've been playing Quidditch for six years, and I *still* get nervous right before the games!"

Leila's eyebrows furrowed. "That can't be right... You couldn't have..." Suddenly her eyes widened and her head shot up. "You were on the team in your first year, weren't you?"

Harry grinned. "Guilty as charged. Youngest Seeker in a century," he said proudly.

Leila wanted to know all about how Harry had gotten the Seeker position, what his first games were like, and who had been on the team each year in his reality. Harry spent half an hour relating all his Quidditch stories and his sister listened intently. When she finally stopped teasing him about the events that had transpired after the last Quidditch match in his sixth year—a.k.a. snogging Ginny Weasley—she fell silent again, and Harry stared thoughtfully into the fire.

Suddenly Leila started laughing. “I was just remembering my first match,” she hastily explained when Harry threw her a “you’re mental” look. “It as my second year—your third—and I was playing Chaser because Alicia Spinnet...” She swallowed hard.

“Was killed by the Basilisk,” Harry finished, feeling his stomach sink. “Go on.”

“You were on the team, but as Reserve Keeper...you were so mad when I got to play and you didn’t, but Oliver Wood was still here, so...”

Harry waved it away. “Just tell me about your first game.”

“Well,” Leila continued, “I was so nervous I didn’t sleep all night before, *and* I threw up all the breakfast I ate the next morning. On top of that, Mum and Dad showed up for the match; it would have been great under normal circumstances, but their presence made my nerves all the worse.”

“So what happened?”

Her ears turned pink, but she grinned. “I accidentally passed the Quaffle to one of the Slytherin Chasers and we lost the game.”

Harry winced. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, Fred and George said they had to bodily stop Wood from throwing himself off the Astronomy Tower, but I think they were joking.”

“Wood gave you a second chance?”

“He had to. All the other people who showed up for tryouts really stank.”

Harry opened his mouth to ask her when she’d gotten so good at Quidditch, but at that moment, Demelza came bounding down the stairs.

“Leila, I can’t find my Nimbus! What am I going to do? No one will let me borrow a spare broom on such short notice... and Merlin knows I can’t fly at all on the school brooms....”

“Relax, Mel,” Leila laughed. “You lent it to Ezekiel for the Ravenclaw practice.”

Demelza visibly relaxed. “Oh. I did, didn’t I? That stupid brother of mine...”

“Why is he borrowing your broom for Ravenclaw practices?” Harry asked curiously.

Demelza flopped down into the chair next to Harry’s. “My parents told him he had to earn money to buy his own broom, just like I did, but he hasn’t earned enough yet. So, being the generous older sister I am...” Leila snorted, but the other girl ignored her. “...I offered to lend him my broom whenever he has practice with the Ravenclaw team. Their first game isn’t until after Christmas, and he’s hoping to have enough money saved up by then.”

“Your brother...Ezekiel...he’s in Ravenclaw?” Harry asked. It was the wrong thing to say—Demelza was looking at him oddly.

Leila quickly jumped in. “I wonder who else is up?” she said. “I mean, we’ve almost got half the team right here...”

“Anita’s up,” Demelza said. “She wasn’t in her bed when I woke up.”

“I think Ivan’s awake as well,” Harry put in. “I heard movement when I passed the third years’ door.”

“What about Ron and Jeremy?” Leila asked.

Harry snorted. “It’d practically take a Death Eater attack to get those two up... Honestly, the two of them together are louder than the Hogwarts Express when they snore.”

Leila smiled slyly. “I think I could manage it.”

“Manage what?”

“Getting them up, you prat.”

Harry shuddered. “Better them than me. Yours isn’t exactly the most pleasant face to see first thing in the morning.”

His jab earned him several well-aimed punches.

“What am I missing?” Anita sang as she entered the Common Room holding her robes and broom.

“Just a bit of good-old sibling rivalry,” Demelza said, rolling her eyes.

“Ooooooh, a fight,” Anita said, laying her robes and broom on a nearby table and coming closer for a good look. “Who’s winning?”

“I am,” Harry and Leila said together.

“No, you’re not!” Leila shouted, attacking him with more ferocity. Harry blindly defended himself from her onslaught. Finally he saw an opening and tackled her...

“Nooooooo!” Leila screeched as Harry started to tickle her. “Help me.... someone...”

Demelza and Anita watched sympathetically. “Sorry, Leila...You do deserve it...” Anita said.

Harry tickled his sister unmercifully for a few minutes before finally deciding to let her save her strength for the match.

She got up from the floor, smoothing out her robes. “Harry James Potter....you will pay for this...”

“Hey guys!” Ivan had appeared in the doorway. “Looks like the whole team’s up. Wait...where’re Jeremy and Ron?”

“Sleeping,” Demelza said.

“Oh,” Ivan said, looking disappointed. “Why were you and Leila fighting, Harry?”

“Harry’s being a git!” Leila snapped, then crossed her arms and turned her back.

“*You* were the one who didn’t speak to me for a week,” Harry shot back.

“You deserved it.”

“So I did,” he acknowledged. “And do you want me to tell your friends here exactly why I deserved it?”

Leila’s face reddened. Harry knew he’d hit the mark; so far, Leila and Theodore had kept their relationship a secret from the other students. People wondered where she went each night, but to his knowledge, no one had figured out the truth yet. Harry suspected that Leila had told only her closest friends—Melissa, and probably Demelza, judging from the amused look on the younger girl’s face.

“Harry James Potter,” she choked, turning an even darker shade of red. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ivan and Anita watching them interestedly. There had been quite a few theories circulating on why the Potter siblings had suddenly stopped all communication; everyone was curious what the true reason was.

Fortunately for her, the Common Room was suddenly flooded with Gryffindors on their way to breakfast. “I’ll go push Jeremy and Ron out of bed,” Harry said on impulse. “I’ll see you all at breakfast, OK?”

Leila nodded mutely. Demelza looked relieved; Anita and Ivan, however, had disappointed expressions on their faces. Harry watched them leave before he turned and headed back up the stairs.

On guard for Slytherins with wands, Harry and his team marched down to the pitch at nine-thirty. It didn’t take long for them to get changed into their Quidditch robes, despite the fact that three of the lot were girls. Harry was grateful, remembering how it used to take Alicia and Katie an eternity to change and get their hair fixed before the game.

“Well, I won’t bore you with a long-winded speech,” Harry told the other six when they were finally gathered together in the boys’ locker room.

There were several sighs of relief. Leila’s was the loudest—probably because she knew firsthand what Wood’s speeches had been like.

“We’ve planned hard and practiced hard, so let’s get out there and play hard—show those stinking Slytherins what true Gryffindor courage looks like. Are you with me?”

The entire team burst into cheers, then dispersed quickly when the five-minute whistle blew. As Harry grabbed his Firebolt and headed for the door, he was sure this would be the easiest game they’d ever won.

He was wrong, of course.

When the commentator—who sounded oddly enough like either Fred or George Weasley—announced the Gryffindor team, the stands erupted into cheers. Well, three-fourths of the spectators were cheering, anyway. The Slytherins remained silent and surly. Harry sighed; some things never changed.

“Let’s go,” he told the team, and they mounted their brooms and soared out into the arena. As the seven made the customary pre-match lap around the pitch, Harry looked back to see how the newest members of the team were doing. Anita looked as if she’d be fine—she was beaming at the tumultuous crowd and waving wildly at her friends. Ivan looked pale, but his jaw was set. He met Harry’s eye as they banked past the Slytherin goal and nodded. Harry sent him a reassuring smile. Ron, on the other hand, was white as a sheet and shaking. Harry inwardly groaned. He’d worked so hard with Ron to get his friend past his fears of messing up...now it looked as if the game might be a repeat of Ron’s disastrous first game in their fifth year.

“And here comes the Gryffindors,” one of the Weasley twins yelled into the magical microphone. “Captain Potter, Chasers Potter, Robbins, and Schuyler, Beaters Javan and Johnson, and Keeper Weasley. Let’s give the team a hand!”

Many people clapped, but Harry noticed quite a few blank and confused faces. The Weasley twin in the commentator's box obviously knew what the confusion was about. "That's right, the Gryffindor team has a new Seeker this year—Harry Potter!"

Harry's team completed their lap, and the players scattered into their positions. "Good luck, Ron, we're counting on you," Harry hissed at Ron as the redhead passed him, heading for the Gryffindor goalpost.

Harry flew to the middle of the pitch to await the arrival of the Slytherin captain. Sirius was there, wearing the referee robes and holding his own broom. "Good luck," his godfather told him, and Harry nodded.

"And here comes the Slytherin team..." the red-haired commentator said. "Chasers Pucey, Vaisey, and the newest addition and only female on the team, Tracy Davis! Behind them are Beaters Goyle and Culver, and Keeper Stuart. And finally, ever one for a dramatic entrance, Captain and Seeker Draco Malfoy."

The Slytherins cheered loudly as the pale seventh year looped the pitch. His team took their positions and Malfoy flew towards Harry and Sirius. He dismounted his broom with a flourish and nodded to the crowd. "The captains step forward to shake hands," the Weasley twin observed. "This is Potter's fifth year on the team, Malfoy's sixth. I've always been curious as to why Malfoy got on the team in the first place...probably his dear dad's generous donation of seven brand new top-of-the-line broomsticks to the Slytherin team..."

"George Rudolph Weasley!" McGonagall exclaimed.

George winced at the use of his full name. "I'm sorry, Professor, just speculations!" he insisted, wrenching the microphone back. "Anyway, Malfoy and Potter shake hands, not a pleasant experience, I'm sure..."

"George!"

"Sorry..."

Indeed, it was not a pleasant experience. Malfoy seemed to be trying to wrench Harry's arm out of his socket. Harry grimaced, but said nothing. He marched back over to his broom and mounted it.

"The Seekers take their positions..." George continued. "The new Quidditch referee and flying instructor, Sirius Black, is stepping forward to release the balls.... There go the Bludgers...now the Snitch is gone... and he's holding the Quaffle...he throws the Quaffle... and the game's begun!"

The roar from the crowd was deafening. "Gryffindor in possession!" George crowed. "Potter—that's Leila, not Harry, in case you couldn't tell—has the Quaffle—she passes to Schuyler and he immediately passes to Robbins—not scared of the ball, is he? Maybe he is. Look out, Demelza! That was a near collision with a Bludger from Culver—and now Slytherin is in possession. Vaisey has the Quaffle, and he passes to Davis—Damn, she's not a bad flyer!"

"Weasley! Watch your language!"

"So sorry, Professor, it won't happen again," George said meekly. "Davis has the Quaffle—she just barely avoids a nice Bludger hit by Anita Johnson—that's Angelina's sister, by the way... She nears the goals...she's going for the shot...she throws....Oh, shoot, Ron misses it! Ten points to Slytherin."

The Slytherins were on their feet in an instant, screaming wildly. Harry flew lower. "Don't worry, Ron... You'll get it next time, mate," he called encouragingly. Ron, instead of looking even more nervous, merely set his jaw in determination and nodded to Harry.

Harry gained altitude again and began looking for the Snitch, keeping one eye on the game below. Unfortunately, George had been right about Tracy Davis. She was an excellent flyer; she was unpredictable, fast, and an excellent Bludger dodger. Harry would never have admitted it, but Davis was every bit as good as Leila.

Slytherin was in possession again. This time, as Pucey flew closer to put the Quaffle through the goal, Ron saw it coming and blocked it cleanly. The Gryffindors roared in approval.

Ten minutes later, Gryffindor scored their first goal. Leila pumped one arm into the air in victory as she flew back to the center of the field.

Harry circled high above the pitch. Where was the dratted Snitch? He scanned the field, but no luck.

“And we’ve got Potter in possession again. Nice pass to Schuyler...Oh no, he’s dodged a Bludger and dropped the Quaffle! Davis catches it—she’s headed for the goal—and she’s cut off by a beautiful Bludger from Jeremy Javan! Potter’s got the Quaffle—she’s headed for the Slytherin end...UNFAIR! You can’t do that!”

The two male Slytherin Chasers were flying next to Leila, one on each side. They seemed to be trying to knock her off her broom. She was holding her own, but now Goyle was flying straight at her...there was going to be a collision...

Then Leila aimed her broom straight up. She soared free, and Goyle collided with Pucey and Vaisey. “TIMEOUT!” Malfoy shrieked from the sky, and Sirius blew his whistle.

The Slytherins converged around Goyle, who was holding his arm and whimpering. Harry flew straight to Sirius. “That was against the rules,” he spat angrily. “They aren’t allowed to box her in like that...”

Sirius nodded. “Gryffindor will get a penalty shot, don’t you worry.”

Once Goyle’s arm had been healed, and the game resumed, Sirius gave Gryffindor a penalty shot. Leila flew forward to take it.

“And Potter has the Quaffle...she’s moving in fast...I tell you, Stuart is no match for this one! She shoots...she SCORES! Gryffindor is in the lead, twenty to ten!”

The game continued. The teams were pretty well matched—Ron was an excellent Keeper, of course, but his nerves kept him from top performance. Overall, Stuart had a greater ratio of saves to misses than Ron did. But the Gryffindor team had by far the superior Chaser team. Although Schuyler was new, he was getting the hang of Chasing quickly. Demelza and Leila worked like clockwork. It was like watching a dance, seeing them passing, faking, and scoring in perfect

form. The only Slytherin Chaser with real talent was Davis, and although she was like a one-girl bombshell, she was no match for the three Gryffindor Chasers. Pucey and Vaisey didn't pose any real competition. The Beaters were pretty evenly matched; Anita and Jeremy didn't have the skill of Fred and George Weasley, but they did well enough. Of the Slytherins, Culver, a burly sixth year, was the best Beater. Goyle was decent—even better than he had been in the old reality—but he wasn't much of a threat.

That only left one person to be worried about—Malfoy. What if he was a better Seeker than Harry in this world? Harry watched the other captain nervously as the blonde boy circled the pitch, searching.

An hour later, the score was fifty-forty, with Slytherins in the lead. Davis had been doggedly attacking the Gryffindor goals for twenty minutes now...Ron had blocked seventeen of her goals in succession, and it looked as if he wasn't going to let a single other goal in for the rest of the game. Leila was stealing away the ball as often as she could, but the Slytherins were beginning to play dirtier and dirtier. The Bludgers were flying at her with ferocity. She kept dodging and ducking, but it seemed that Malfoy had instructed his Beaters to aim for her specifically. And Stuart seemed to be having the same luck Ron was having—he had saved every goal she'd aimed at him in the last half-hour.

They had taken the Slytherins by surprise, though. The look on Malfoy's face when Ron had saved Davis's goals had been priceless... Obviously, the Slytherins weren't expecting any real competition from the opposition in the match.

Harry looked down at the game below. Leila and Demelza were passing the Quaffle back and forth, heading towards the Slytherin goal post... Demelza dove to avoid a Bludger, and the Quaffle flew out of her hands and into Pucey's...

He glanced at the commentator's box, and noticed that McGonagall was missing. He vaguely wondered where she had gone...

"Pucey passes to Davis. Davis is nearly hit by a Bludger from Johnson—she's flying toward the goal—she fakes left and—yes, YES! Weasley saves the goal AGAIN!"

Harry was searching frantically for the Snitch. He knew the game below was pretty much at a stalemate. He simply *had* to find the Snitch soon...he knew his team was getting tired...

And then, he spotted it. It was lingering at the base of the commentator's box. He shot across the field, not even looking to see whether Malfoy had seen it or not...he just had to get there first...

"Oh, Merlin...I think Potter's seen the Snitch!" George yelled into the microphone. "He's diving...Good god, he's a human rocket! He's...headed straight toward me! Bloody hell..."

Harry pulled his broom up just inches away from the box. He soared upwards, feeling his heart beating wildly. He held up the clenched fist that held the Snitch...

The Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs exploded into cheers, shrieks, and applause. "He caught the Snitch!" George Weasley was yelling. "Take, that, you foul, loathsome, evil Slytherins..."

A second later, Harry was encircled by six people in red Quidditch robes. "You did it, Harry!" Demelza screamed. "Malfoy didn't even see it coming...he turned around, and you'd got the Snitch!"

Eventually, Harry collapsed onto the ground, his teammates landing around him. Then he was being hoisted onto several people's shoulders and carried up toward the castle... The crowd was screaming his name...

And he felt like he might explode with happiness.

It was the end of a perfect day. At least it felt that way to Harry as he climbed the stairs to the seventh years' dormitory. The rest of the Gryffindors were still partying, but victory or not, he still had a Charms essay due the next day. Harry settled down on his bed and spread the books out. He had just opened his textbook to page 271 when he heard someone calling his name.

Harry looked around, puzzled. Everyone else was still downstairs. Then he realized the noise was coming from his trunk. Berating his

own forgetfulness, he leapt off the bed and quickly retrieved the two-way mirror from inside an old sock.

“Hey! Guess what? We won the match against Slytherin today. You should’ve seen Malfoy’s face when we beat the socks off of him. Have you ever seen Leila play? She’s incredible! She scored most of the goals herself... Remus, what’s wrong?”

Lupin’s face was pale and stricken, and his voice shook when he spoke. “Something’s happened.”

All the excitement from the game vanished, and Harry felt his stomach sinking. “What’s happened?” he asked, not sure if he really wanted to know.

Lupin took a deep breath. “Voldemort’s found out that the Order has been destroying his Horcruxes.

It was like a punch in the gut. “You’re not serious,” Harry said weakly.

The man shook his head. “I’m afraid I am. Unfortunately the news just gets worse from here.”

Harry waited.

“In revenge, he, ah, planned a series of Death Eater attacks specifically targeting Order members. The attacks took place today.”

“Who?”

“Pardon?”

“Who died?” Harry asked stiffly, bracing himself.

“Not as many as should be dead,” Lupin hedged. “Some who were attacked were able to defend themselves. Arthur and Percy Weasley, for example. Kiara Thompson. Emmeline Vance. Moody too.”

“Who died?” Harry repeated. “Just tell me.”

Lupin sighed. “Shacklebolt.”

“And?”

“Four Order members you don’t know.”

“Who else?”

“Bill Weasley.”

Harry closed his eyes. Poor Mrs. Weasley. Her two oldest sons, dead.
“And?”

“Alice and Frank Longbottom.”

Harry drew in a sharp breath. “Does Neville know?” he whispered.

“McGonagall is on her way to tell him.”

Lupin was still holding something back, though. “Who else?”

A long pause.

“TELL ME! *Who else? Who died?*”

Lupin’s face crumpled as he choked, “I’m so sorry, Harry. It’s... Lily and James. They’re dead.”

Author’s Note: *sighs* I know the flames will come, but honestly, I’ve been planning that for forever. I’ve already got the complete story outlined, so I will not be resurrecting them from the dead or changing my mind about their deaths. I’m so sorry, my dear readers... but bear with me...explanation of the deaths to come in chapter forty, as well as the revealing of the Edit: THIRD person in the Aperio.

Chapter 40

Harry's entire body felt numb as he sat on his still-made bed later that night, listening to Neville's sobs in the next bed. The absence of the usual snores from Ron's bed told Harry that he and Neville weren't the only ones still awake. Harry hadn't seen Leila since McGonagall had called them both out into the corridor to break the news. His sister had emitted one horrified gasp and had dashed away towards her dormitory.

McGonagall has sighed as she watched Leila's retreating form. "Remus already told you, didn't he?" she had asked softly.

Harry had nodded, impassively, not meeting her eyes.

"Listen, Harry, if there's anything I can do..."

"Unless you can bring them back, there's nothing," Harry had said curtly before he too turned quickly and left.

Now he regretted being so rude. She had, after all, only been trying to help.

The emptiness inside of him threatened to consume him. He knew what the pain of loss felt like—he'd felt it for Cedric, Sirius, and Dumbledore—but this was worse. Much worse. This was his parents...

They'd been so alive when he'd seen them at the meeting the night before; James had slapped Harry's back and wished him good luck on the Quidditch game the next day...Lily had kissed him goodbye...

Did I kiss her back?

Harry wasn't sure. He wished he had a Time-Turner...he wanted to erase the entire day and start over again...maybe if he hadn't been so caught up with Quidditch, he could have done something. Maybe he could have prevented their deaths somehow.

I should have tried harder to convince them to come to the match...
Harry thought, the ache in his chest becoming even more painful.
Maybe if I'd tried harder...

But James and Lily hadn't been able to make it to the match, and that had made all the difference.

I wonder how they died?

Lupin hadn't been able to give him details—only the information that as James left his Quidditch practice, he was ambushed by a dozen Death Eaters. The same had happened to Lily as she left the Institute that afternoon.

I hope it was quick. I hope they didn't have to suffer.

For the first time, Harry felt himself longing for life before the Aperio. He had come to grips with his parents' deaths years ago. Now fate had given them back, only to cruelly snatch them away again. *What am I thinking? I don't want to go back!* he thought furiously. But now he wasn't so sure anymore.

Harry sighed. This was getting nowhere. There was no use wishing for impossible things. It had been months, and still Lupin was no closer to locating the third member of the Aperio than he had been in July.

Neville was still sobbing into his pillow, and Harry found himself feeling even more sorry for the boy than he felt for himself. But when he felt he could listen no longer, he slipped off of his bed and quietly left the dormitory. When he reached the Common Room, it was blessedly empty—except for one lone figure curled up in the chair by the fire.

Leila looked up with dry eyes as Harry approached and collapsed onto the rug. "You couldn't sleep either?" she asked softly.

Harry shook his head. "That, and Neville."

"I forgot about Neville," she gasped. "Poor Neville! I thought I had it bad. At least... At least I've still got you."

Harry stared into the fireplace and watched the flames dancing in and out of the logs.

Leila let out a sob. “Oh, who am I kidding?” she choked. “I’m being a baby. Neville’s just lost his entire family—and I’m not counting that horrible grandmother of his. And you—you’ve lost Mum and Dad twice!”

His sister lapsed into silence. Then Harry heard movement behind him. A moment later she had lowered herself onto the rug next to him and buried her face on his shoulder.

At first, he awkwardly patted her back as she sobbed, but then he relaxed, rubbing her shoulders and stroking her hair. After a long cry, she sniffed and said, “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Harry said honestly, and the ache in his chest eased a little.

She chuckled. “The old Harry wouldn’t have let me cry on his shoulder like that. I think I like the new Harry better.”

“You shouldn’t,” Harry said bitterly. “Because of me, Mum and Dad are dead.”

“Don’t say that,” Leila whispered. “It’s not true. You brought hope to the Order.”

“And that hope was just destroyed today. Voldemort knows about the destroyed Horcruxes, and he probably made a dozen new ones today.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it IS!” Harry scooted away and glared at her. “If I hadn’t told Lupin about the Horcruxes, he wouldn’t have told the Order... Voldemort wouldn’t have ever found out... It’s MY fault!”

Leila’s eyes filled with tears again. “Stop, Harry. Don’t do this to yourself! It’s *not* your fault. You always take the blame for

everything...you've got to grow up and realize that you didn't single-handedly cause the deaths of dozens of people in both realities..."

"But..."

"No! Don't blame yourself!" She slid closer to him and pillowed her face on his shoulder again.

"But Voldemort had never known about the Horcruxes, they'd still be alive."

Apparently Leila didn't have an answer for this. After a few minutes of silence, she spoke, her head still resting on his shoulder. "It's silly of me to be thinking about this, but Harry, where will we live?"

Harry considered this. "I guess with Sirius. He's my godfather, and probably yours too." Suddenly he froze. Evidently Leila had just thought the same thing, because she sat up straight and looked at him with wide eyes.

"Sirius," they breathed together.

"Holy mother of Merlin. I completely forgot about him!" Leila exclaimed. "Here I was, so wrapped up in my own grief...Harry, you have to find him."

"I know... Wait, why?"

She gave him a look that reminded him of the looks Hermione usually reserved for very dim Slytherins. "He and Dad are...were..." she corrected herself, fighting back another sob, "best friends. To Sirius it's the same as having a brother die. And he's so unpredictable as is. You're probably closest to him besides Dad, and *maybe* Regulus, but Regulus isn't here, of course. Oh, what am I saying? Just find him, Harry!"

"Are you going to be OK?" Harry asked, looking worriedly at her.

"I'll be fine," she said, smiling bravely at him. "Just go!"

She followed him upstairs and watched as he lit his wand and pawed through the contents of his trunk. When he finally found the Marauders' Map, he settled down on the bed and spread it out on his lap.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Together they examined the map. "He's not in the teacher's quarters," Harry said, frowning. "I don't even see him in the castle."

"There he is," Leila whispered, pointing to the grounds. A black dot was moving fast along the lake. Harry jumped up and peered out the window. In the moonlight he could barely see a black speck racing across the grass.

"Right," he said, returning to Leila.

"You can't go now, though," she said. "Look."

Right outside the portrait hole, a small dot labeled "Filch" was pacing. "He's probably hoping to catch couples on their way back to dorm after their own version of 'victory celebration,'" she said, stifling a giggle that sounded more like a sob.

"Then I'll have to use the other exit," Harry said, moving towards the open double windows.

"Be careful," she whispered tearfully.

A moment later he had transformed, and a flurry of wings, he had passed through the windows.

The night was cold; the moon, just a sliver hanging in the sky. The bitter winds carried Harry higher and higher as he banked and climbed, looking desperately for a large black dog. Harry soared towards the lake, and descended. Finally he spotted Padfoot.

Harry dove. A second later, he was flying just a few feet above the loping dog. He tried getting closer, but Padfoot snarled and snapped at him. Harry kept his distance, knowing that Sirius probably wasn't thinking rationally right now.

Padfoot ran along the side of the lake for some time. Then he angled off towards the castle. Was Sirius going back? No, the black dog took another turn and dashed towards the gates. Harry followed.

Through the gates, across the bridge... Padfoot was headed along the road to Hogsmeade. Harry followed, wondering if his godfather was going to the Hog's Head. But no, Padfoot raced through the town, and on the outskirts, he skidded into an alleyway.

Harry landed atop a signpost and watched his godfather whining and howling, expressing his grief as only a dog could. Finally the dog collapsed onto the ground, transforming into a disheveled Sirius.

Harry flew silently closer and landed a few yards away, transforming back. "Sirius?"

There was no reply.

"Sirius? Are you alright?"

Harry crept closer. Sirius's body was shaking with silent sobs.

"It's me...Harry..."

Finally his godfather looked up. Harry inwardly shuddered as he met Sirius's eyes—it was almost as if the light had left them. The older man looked more like the Azkaban Sirius than ever before. His face was full of despair.

"Harry."

"I'm here."

"You shouldn't have...shouldn't have come..."

Harry said nothing, inching closer.

"It's late...and dangerous out here..."

"Since when were you one to think of danger?" Harry said softly.

Sirius turned his head away. "The Death Eaters... They might be looking for you..."

"Why?"

"They're hunting down the members of the Order, Harry... They'll kill you too if they get a chance..."

Harry lowered himself to the ground, feeling the throbbing ache in his chest once again. "Are you alright?" he said again.

He knew the answer already, but also realized that Sirius would never admit it. "Leila was worried about you," Harry continued. "She wasn't sure what you'd do..."

Sirius laughed harshly. "Why worry about me? You two should be wallowing in grief right now. It was your parents who died. I..."

"You were his best friend," Harry reminded him. "You were practically brothers."

His godfather's shoulders shook even harder, and he pounded the ground with his fist. "I should have been there... I could have prevented it! I was supposed to go to his practice, but Emmeline Vance couldn't make it to watch Ginny, and I decided to stay with her instead...I'm such a bloody idiot..."

"It wasn't your fault," Harry said, feeling a sensation of déjà vu. Less than an hour ago, Leila had told him the same thing. "If you'd gone, you'd be dead too... Then where would Leila and I be? Parentless and godfatherless."

"Some godfather I've turned out to be," Sirius said bitterly. "I didn't even have the courage to break the news to you two...McGonagall had to do it..."

"Lupin told me," Harry said quietly.

"They should have made Remus your godfather," Sirius continued. "I couldn't even save Lily and James...how am I supposed to protect

you? There I was, refereeing the match while Lily and James were being murdered..." Suddenly he cut off, and Harry jerked his head up.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure," Sirius said, his voice suddenly calmer. "I can't tell. Here, help me up."

Harry stood quickly and offered Sirius a hand. His godfather scrambled to his feet and looked around warily.

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing," Sirius said. "But something feels wrong...we should get back to the school, Harry, it's not safe out here...GET DOWN!"

Two jets of red light had appeared out of the shadows. Harry threw himself to the ground, and the spells missed him by inches. He and Sirius crouched against the wall.

At the end of the alley way, four dark shapes were approaching. The moonlight fell on one particularly dark figure, wearing black robes and a mask...Death Eaters...

On instinct, Harry threw up a shield. Only seconds later, two more spells sped toward him and ricocheted off of his shield.

"Nice shield," Sirius began, but the spells started flying. "Keep your shield up!" his godfather yelled. "I'll fire."

Sirius leaned forward and began his own barrage of spells. The four shapes scattered, still battering Harry's shield with a variety of hexes and jinxes... Then a couple of deep red and purple lines flew past...

"They're starting with the more serious spells," Sirius shouted. "Hold the shield..."

A yell from one of the Death Eaters let Harry know that someone had been hit. Several more spells bounced off the blue shield. "Atta boy, Harry," Sirius cheered.

But Harry could feel the shield crumbling. "It's breaking," he cried, but not soon enough. With a crack, his shield disintegrated, Harry dove out of the way of an oncoming stunner...the spell just barely missed him...and it hit Sirius straight in the chest.

"Sirius!" Harry shouted as his godfather crumpled to the ground.

"Get the boy," someone yelled.

On instinct, Harry rolled out of the way and the bricks where he'd just been shattered into a million pieces at the force of the spells. Harry dove behind some garbage bins. "Stupefy! Impedimenta! Expelliarmus!"

One of the spells found its mark... The tallest Death Eater was blasted back into the side of a building and lay still on the ground where he'd fallen.

But a second later, his refuge was blasted to bits with a well-aimed Reducto... Harry flattened himself to the ground and slithered around the side, trying to stay hidden.

"Where'd the stupid boy go?"

It was a female's voice. The woman moved closer, holding her wand out in front of her.

"He's around here somewhere," the other Death Eater said, a man's voice this time.

"Playing hide and seek, is he?" the woman cackled. "Let's see if he'll show himself once we've finished off Black." Harry watched in horror as she twirled her wand, finally pointing it casually at the fallen body of his godfather...

"Avada Ke..."

"NO!" Harry screamed, and threw himself at the woman. The masked figure stumbled, and the spell bounced harmlessly off the side of the building.

The other Death Eater pointed a wand at the unconscious Sirius. "Nooooo," Harry yelled again, shooting a stunning spell at the offending Death Eater, who dodged it.

Suddenly his ears were filled with an unearthly high pitched laughter. The woman Death Eater pulled off her mask, and a cascade of dark brown hair flooded out. Harry found himself staring into the heavily hooded eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Is my dear cousin important to you? Then it will give me even more pleasure to kill him right now!" she shrieked.

"I won't let you kill him," Harry yelled without thinking. "Petrificus Totalis," he shouted, but she simply deflected it with a flick of her wand. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the other Death Eater raise his wand, but he was focused on saving Sirius from that witch. "You won't kill him... NOT AGAIN!"

The other Death Eater froze. Bellatrix gave another shriek of laughter and raised her wand, but Harry was quicker. "Expelliarmus," he yelled, feeling his fury channeled into the spell. It hit her in the chest, and her wand flew toward Harry as Bellatrix was blasted backwards by the intensity of the spell. She slammed up against the wall, and lay still. Harry whirled around to face the other Death Eater, and raised his wand to cast a spell...

"Potter, I'd advise you to stop waving that thing around."

Harry suddenly felt paralyzed. He knew that voice. The Death Eater took advantage of the few extra moments, and disarmed him. "That's better, Potter. Now if you'll pick your lower jaw off the ground and collect your Pureblood traitor godfather, we can be off."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Harry spat contemptuously.

"As always, you are so arrogant to think you can resist me without a wand. Let me see..." The man flicked his wand up and said, "Accio wands!" Bellatrix's and Sirius's wands soared into the Death Eater's outstretched hand. "Now I have in my possession four wands, and you have none. If you move an inch I didn't first approve, your

godfather here will be dead before you can even beg. Any further objections?"

Harry ground his teeth, but knew there was nothing to do. "Stand," the Death Eater said, and Harry rose slowly.

"You can take off your mask," Harry said bitterly. "I know who you are."

"Do I detect a tiny bit of intelligence? Unbelievable. Fine, then," the man said carelessly, then flipped off his mask.

Harry found himself staring into the cold, black eyes of Severus Snape.

Author's Note: I am so happy to have that chapter up. I wrote it months ago, but didn't know it'd take so long to write the stuff in between.

By the way, if you didn't get it, the third person is SEVERUS SNAPE! The key phrase is: ' "You won't kill him... NOT AGAIN!" The other Death Eater froze.' Kudos to everyone who guessed correctly! Sorry, not Hermione, not Voldemort, not Pettigrew, not some new character I've invented...but SNAPE. A nice long Snape/Harry conversation coming up next, with plenty of explanations... And by the way, just because Snape hated James doesn't mean he wanted him dead...he might have wanted him alive if he truly had Lily's best interest in mind... He did love her, after all.

By the way, for all of you whose minds are in the gutter, Leila is NOT out shagging Theodore every night. She is SNOGGING or in American terms, making out. Or just talking to him. Hello, the guy's a Slytherin, and if she wants to spend any time at ALL with her boyfriend, it has to be when no one else is around, thus the midnight meetings. And she is NEVER out all night long. Just out later than Harry, that's all. Hope I cleared that up.

Guess how many reviews I got for the last chapter? FIFTY-TWO 52! I'm still hyperventilating. Thanks! I'm so incredibly happy and surprised.

Chapter 41

Harry stared contemptuously into the cold, black eyes of Severus Snape. "What do you want?" he spat.

"Really, Potter, you're even thicker than I gave you credit for," the man said coldly. "I would have thought it to be obvious."

"How would I know what you want?" Harry shot back.

Snape ignored this. "The only reason I did not use this marvelous opportunity to finish off both you and your pathetic godfather is a simple comment you made that intrigued me."

Harry waited.

"I seem to remember in your foolish attempt to take out Bellatrix, you shouted, 'You won't kill him, not again.'"

Harry could feel his cheeks paling. The last thing he needed was the Voldemort finding out about the Aperio...

"As Black is lying on the ground before me, granted, not in perfect health, but also definitely not dead, I am, of course...shall we say, mystified by your assertion that Bellatrix has killed Black before. I want an explanation."

"I won't tell you anything!" Harry snarled. "Never!"

"Tut, tut, Potter. I'll remind you, I have the wands. You'll tell me what I want to know, or die."

"Go ahead," Harry said bitterly. "Kill me now. In cold blood, and defenseless. Like the coward you are. Just like you killed Dum..." Harry cut himself off, suddenly realizing what he'd done.

Snape smirked at him. "Yes?" But Harry shook his head, his lips pressed together.

"You *must* tell me!" Snape continued. "Why did you say that? How did you know? I'm warning you, Potter, if you refuse to tell me, I will squish your stubbornness; I will use any means..." He began to pace back and forth, wand twitching. His eyes were glazed—Harry had seen that same desperate, crazed look once before, on the night Sirius had almost been kissed by the Dementors, and Snape had been sure he'd receive the Order of Merlin.

Snape's rant continued, but Harry wasn't listening. He was watching for a window of opportunity. Maybe if he attacked Snape Muggle-style, he'd have the element of surprise behind him. Maybe he could get his wand back, stun Snape, and apparate Sirius out of here. Harry waited...watched...then when Snape's back was turned as the former Potions teacher reached the pinnacle of his raging speech, Harry dove at him.

Snape whirled around and a second later, Harry was frozen with a nonverbal Petrificus Totalis spell. He tumbled silently to the ground, face first. Snape rolled him over with a kick and stared maliciously down. "That Gryffindor tendency to think before you act. Typical...your stupid father was the same way. You're idiotic enough to think that you have the power to overcome me? I, the master of the Dark Arts?"

Don't insult my dad, Harry wanted to shout. Instead, all he could do was lay there, frozen on the ground, seething up at his former teacher.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking I'll be compassionate, Potter... I was far too easy on you in school, but no longer. Answer my questions, or..."

Snape left the threat unfinished, but Harry knew what was implied. He wasn't worrying about that, however, for his mind had latched onto Snape's words... *I was far too easy on you in school...* The pieces began to fall into place in his mind.

"No sudden moves, Potter, or you'll feel the pain of the Cruciatus Curse and I promise you, no mercy will be shown," Snape warned, and then Harry was released from the spell. He scrambled backwards a few feet, feeling the blood draining from his face.

“No,” he gasped. “No, it can’t be... It can’t be you...”

Snape frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The Aperio,” Harry blurted out before he could stop himself. “The alternate reality... My parents were alive again, and Sirius... It happened at the beginning of last summer, the day after...”

“The day after Dumbledore’s funeral,” Snape finished, his face pale in the moonlight.

Harry nodded. His mind was a storm of conflicting thoughts and emotions. *Snape?* The third person? It couldn’t be true.. But here Snape was. Harry couldn’t understand it—Snape had hated his parents! He’d called Lily a Mudblood. But he must have regretted his role in their deaths, or else the Aperio would have never happened. If Snape really had regretted the Potters’ deaths, maybe he was still on the side of the Order. Maybe he wasn’t working for Voldemort. But no, that couldn’t be right—he’d killed Dumbledore!

“You hated my parents,” Harry muttered, trying to figure out what was going on, hoping it was only a dream and that soon he’d wake up in his bed and find that this whole miserable day had never happened...

“What makes you think that?” Snape’s voice cut into Harry’s thoughts.

Harry struggled to organize the memories and questions that were spinning through his head. “My dad—you always hated him for being so awful to you when you went to Hogwarts. And you called my mum ‘Mudblood.’”

Was he imagining it? or had Snape actually winced when Harry had said, ‘Mudblood’? “Your father was a pompous oaf. He was vain and conceited, and he was convinced that the world revolved around him,” Snape said coldly. But then his voice lost a little of its sharpness. “But I never wanted him dead.”

“And my mum?” Harry pressed. He had to know... He had to know the truth...

“Evans?” Snape said carelessly, but he turned his back so Harry couldn’t see his face. “She and I...might have been friends...before she started dating Potter...”

Suddenly a memory sparked at the back of Harry’s mind... “The letter,” he exclaimed. Everything was making sense now. “The letter I found in the attic... You used to write her! The letter was from you!”

Snape spun around. “What if it was?” he challenged coldly.

“You...you liked her,” Harry stated. He couldn’t bring himself to say “loved”... it was just too disturbing to think about.

The Potions master stared straight at him. Harry wondered if Snape was trying to read his mind. “So I did.”

“Then why? Why did you tell Voldemort the prophecy? You’re the reason they’re dead!” Harry yelled, feeling rage pouring into him—the same rage he’d felt on the night Trelawny had accidentally told him who had betrayed his parents to Voldemort... “You didn’t even try to save them!”

“Don’t accuse me of not trying, Potter!” Snape cried, his eyes flashing furiously, black robes billowing in the wind. “I didn’t *know* the prophecy referred to their son... to you... When Voldemort came to the conclusion that it was either you or Longbottom, I tried to save both your parents! I went to Dumbledore...he put your parents under the Fidelius Charm. When Pettigrew sold your parents over to Voldemort, I begged him not to kill her... He said he’d spare her life if he could...” Snape whirled on Harry. “Didn’t you ever wonder why Voldemort gave your mother the chance to live? Didn’t you, Potter?”

It all made sense now. Harry *had* wondered...everytime he encountered a Dementor, he wondered at Voldemort’s words: “Stand aside...stand aside, you silly girl!” His mother could have chosen life...all because of Snape. But instead she had chosen death to save Harry.

Harry suddenly realized he was shaking with cold. He pulled his jumper closer and tried to stop his chattering teeth. “But what about Dumbledore? You killed him...I saw you!”

Snape gave Harry a long look. "You should get back to Hogwarts; it's cold out here..."

"NO! I have to know!" Harry tried to stand, to prove he was alright, but he seemed to be having a hard time getting his frozen extremities to cooperate.

"Here," the man said. He tossed something at Harry, who caught it reflexively. It was his wand. For a moment, he just stared at it, then up at Snape in disbelief.

Snape snorted. "Stop gawking, Potter. Cast a warming charm or conjure up a cloak or something. If you die of hypothermia, it would completely defeat the purpose of our conversation tonight."

Harry quickly obeyed. A moment later, a delicious warmth was seeping into his bones. He stretched his legs, then remembering his godfather, sent the same spell in Sirius's direction. Sirius groaned, but remained unconscious. Snape was watching him carefully.

"You're avoiding my question," Harry said bluntly. He slowly raised himself off the ground, wand grasped tightly in his hand.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Fine. You probably won't believe the truth, if you're any bit as narrow-minded as your father."

It took effort, but Harry ignored the jab. "Try me," he challenged, staring straight back at Snape.

"Dumbledore planned his death," Snape said simply.

There were five long seconds of silence as Harry's head reeled. "No...he wouldn't... Why? What reason would he have?"

Snape turned away from Harry and stared down the alleyway. "Last summer, when I discovered how the Dark Lord had given the younger Malfoy the task of killing Dumbledore, I told the headmaster immediately. It was not two days later that he attempted to destroy that ring—a Horcrux, if I'm not mistaken. He called me immediately to assist him. The ring was cursed; I managed to stop the poison from infiltrating his entire body, but his hand was incurable, and the

damage was done. I couldn't entirely remove the poison; we both knew that his death was inevitable."

"He...he was dying? All that time he was *dying*?" Harry said incredulously.

"Once we both knew the truth, he came out with the plan," Snape said, ignoring Harry. "It was ingenious, really. I would kill him when the time was right, save Draco from becoming a murderer, and give Voldemort the ultimate proof of my loyalties."

"And you agreed?"

Snape gave Harry a long look. "Not at first. It took quite a bit of persuasion on his part. In all his planning, he never considered the fact that I might refuse to kill him...that I might not feel right about brutally ending the life of the man who had given me a second chance," Snape said bitterly. "He eventually convinced me. A week later, Narcissa and Bellatrix visited me, and I swore the Unbreakable Vow. Dumbledore was pleased, but I regretted it the moment the binding was complete. I argued with him all year long. Near the end, though, I could see him growing weaker. And then..."

"The Astronomy tower," Harry finished, feeling his stomach balling up again. "How..."

"No!" Snape said sharply, drawing himself up. "We cannot linger here any longer! The Dark Lord will wonder what is taking us so long... He might send more Death Eaters to check."

"But..."

"Meet me at the Hog's Head tomorrow! We can sort things out there. Two o'clock sharp. Don't be seen."

Harry hesitated.

"Still not sure if you can trust me?" Snape sneered, his eyes glittering.

Harry nodded.

“Well, you’re going to have to. Believe me, I’m not going to go ratting on you to Voldemort. I daresay Pettigrew’s done enough of that already...”

“But...”

Snape cut him off. “Here,” he said, thrusting Sirius’s wand at Harry, who took it. “When more Death Eaters show up, we’ll need a plausible story... You two took three of us out, you could have taken out four... They weren’t expecting you to know your stuff so well, Potter.”

Harry blinked. Had Snape just given him a compliment?

“I suppose if they found all of us unconscious, it would look less suspicious,” Snape continued, mostly to himself.

“I could stun you,” Harry suggested. Immediately he knew it was the wrong thing to say.

“I’m sure it would give you great pleasure,” Snape said sarcastically, “but I’ll stun myself, thank you.” He took back Sirius’s wand. “Just in case they check our stories with the Priori Incantatem,” he told Harry. “You do know how to Side-Along Apparate, don’t you?”

Harry nodded again. “Yeah.”

“Apparate him back to the gates, then,” Snape ordered. “It’s not safe for you to be seen in Hogsmeade in your human or Animagus forms.”

Harry stared at him. “How did you...”

“Tomorrow, Potter! Not tonight! Here, destroy this,” Snape instructed, tossing Bellatrix’s wand to Harry. He pointed Sirius’s wand at himself, then paused. “Remember, Potter, two sharp. Don’t be late, don’t bring anyone else with you, and don’t tell anyone where you’re going.”

“Until tomorrow, then,” Harry said, then watched as Snape stunned himself. He picked up Sirius’s wand and took one last look at the four unconscious Death Eaters before hurrying to his godfather’s side.

“Sirius?”

There was no reply. With effort, Harry managed to haul his godfather up. With Sirius draped over his shoulder, he concentrated, and a moment later they had appeared in front of the gates. He dragged Sirius through, then pulled out his wand. “Ennervate.”

Sirius jerked instantly into consciousness. “Harry! Good lord, what happened? Where are the Death Eaters?”

“I stunned the last two and apparated you back here,” Harry said, holding out a hand to Sirius, who accepted the help up.

“Merlin, Harry, you took out two by yourself? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Here’s your wand.” Harry handed Sirius a wand, then realised it was Lestranger’s. “Sorry, here’s yours...”

“Then whose wand is this?” Sirius asked, examining the other wand.

“Bellatrix Lestranger’s,” Harry told him.

Immediately Sirius’s face hardened. “*She* was there? I’m going back; I’m going to finish her off once and for all!” He started towards the gates, but Harry grabbed his sleeve.

“No! Sirius, you can’t! There will be other Death Eaters there by now, you’ll be out numbered. She’s not worth it.”

Sirius turned, an incredulous look on his face. “Don’t you know? Minerva didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Sirius closed his eyes as a painful expression crossed his face. “Bellatrix Lestranger killed Lily.”

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t sure how to react, how to feel. Too much had happened that night. First his parents were dead, then Snape wasn’t working for Voldemort, and finally his own mother had become the latest of Bellatrix’s victims. It was too much to comprehend. Suddenly

Harry felt tired...no, exhausted... All he wanted to do was fly back to his dorm and crawl into his warm four-poster bed...

Sirius noticed too. "You should get to bed, Harry," he said. He looked back through the gates and kicked the ground. "I don't think I could sleep tonight if I wanted to."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked, fighting the waves of dizziness.

"I'm going to drop by Grimmauld Place...see how Regulus and Ginny are doing."

Suddenly Harry remembered something. "Sirius...you've got to get them out of there! Grimmauld Place...my dad...Secret-keeper..."

Sirius's eyes widened. "Oh damn... They're not safe! But where could I take them? The Weasley's place isn't safe; it's still being watched by Aurors. I could take them to Godric's Hollow, but I wouldn't feel right..."

"Take them to Lupin's place," Harry said, cutting him off. "It's safe."

Sirius frowned. "Remus?" he said doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

"I'm the Secret-keeper," Harry told him quietly.

Fortunately Sirius didn't ask any questions. He simply nodded and said, "I'll need to know where he lives."

"Twenty-three Townsend Road in Liverpool," Harry replied. Sirius conjured up a piece of parchment and a quill and Harry scribbled down the information and handed the slip back to Sirius, who tucked it away in his pocket.

"Right." Sirius took two steps toward the gate, then paused. "Promise me you'll go straight to the castle?"

"I promise."

His godfather nodded, gave Harry a small smile, then stepped out of the gates and vanished with a pop.

Author's Note: Long time, no update! Well, I survived a week in the Wind River Range in Wyoming, USA. A week of backpacking: tents, sleeping bags, disgusting food, silver dollar-sized blisters, and beautiful mountains. And now I'm back to civilization, using my mom's laptop to update from a hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. I'll be home on Friday, so then the updates will come more quickly. I wrote a lot while I was on vacation, though not all of my writing was on this story. Warning, this chapter has not been betaed yet, though it will.

Please go check out the new Harry/Luna oneshot I've just posted. My first attempt at a Harry/Luna pairing story, so please review. It's called *Helping Harry*.

There is also a new chapter up of *The Trio and Ginny Read Fanfiction*.

Patience. More explanation of Aperiros and Snape to come in the next chapter.

And...the big news...someone wants to translate this story into French! Me! Translated! I'm in seventh heaven. And we're over seven hundred reviews.

Chapter 42

The following day felt like the longest day of Harry's life. He slept very little, despite being so tired. He skipped his classes and meals and refused to talk to anyone, including Leila. He was afraid that if she started asking questions about the night before, he'd tell her about Snape. He wasn't sure how she'd react to the discovery of the third person in the Aperio.

Around noon, he received an owl from Sirius.

*Grimmauld Place evacuated. They are safe, as well as the objects.
S.B.*

Harry sighed in relief. Too many people had already died. He shuddered to think of what the Death Eaters would have done had they captured Regulus and Ginny.

He spent the remaining time in his room pacing. Jeremy and Seamus didn't bother him, and Ron and Neville had already gone home to be with their families. As two approached, Harry left the tower and made for the secret passageway hidden by the statue of the humpbacked witch, armed with the Invisibility Cloak and Marauders' Map.

As Harry neared the Hog's Head under his cloak, he wished the Map covered Hogsmeade. It'd be much easier to determine whether Snape had set a trap for him if he could see who was inside the pub.

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak tighter around him—the November wind was threatening to rip it off. When the next customer entered the Hog's Head, Harry slipped in behind him and pressed himself into a corner. The pub was filled with shady characters as always, but at first inspection, Harry didn't recognize any Death Eaters. Well, except for one. A sallow-faced man with a long, hooked nose sat at the very furthest table. His eyes were covered with a dark hood, but Harry recognized him instantly.

After one more cautionary glance around the pub, Harry slipped through the tables towards the back and slid into the adjacent seat. He pulled his cloak off.

"You're late," Snape said coldly. "And you should have done something about your appearance, Potter. Someone might recognize you."

In reply, Harry concentrated. A moment later, his hair was brown and longer, and his eyes had turned blue.

Snape nodded in approval. "Much better. Now, which spell would you use to insure that we won't be overheard?"

Harry pulled out his wand. "Muffliato," he said, and was halfway through the process of resheathing his wand when he realized which spell he'd used, and where he'd gotten it from. He looked up, feeling like he'd just got with his hand in the cookie jar.

Snape pulled his hood off, and his expression was unreadable. Now Harry could see the bruises and welts the hood had been concealing. "I knew there had to be a reason you were doing so well in Potions last year. You certainly didn't inherit talent your mother had in that particular subject."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Sorry... I honestly didn't know the Potions book was yours, not until you told me. Well, Hermione had it figured out, I think."

One eyebrow rose. "Ms. Granger figured out that your Potions book used to belong to me? Might I inquire how?"

"Half-Blood *Prince*," Harry said. "I think she was reading old Daily Prophets and saw an article about Eileen Prince winning some award. She then looked up the marriage announcements and found that Eileen Prince married Tobias Snape."

"Ah."

The world was coming to an end, Harry thought. Here he was, having a civilized conversation with Snape. He decided to take a risk. "Um, sir? Can I ask how you got all those cuts?"

Snape's face darkened. "The Dark Lord was not pleased when we failed last night. I would have made a potion for it, but I was too busy."

"Too busy?"

"Well, if you really can't restrain your curiosity, I was reading about Aperios."

Harry leaned back in his chair. "You didn't previously know about them?"

Snape scowled. "Potter, don't you think that if I'd had the slightest inkling of what kind of dimension travel I was involved in, I'd have been knocking on Order members' doors to discover who the other two people were?"

Harry stared down at the table. "I thought I was going crazy," he said quietly.

"'Crazy' doesn't even describe it," Snape said, snorting. "I thought I had gone insane. I went to bed at Malfoy Manor, and I woke up at Spinner's End. Lucius Malfoy was out of Azkaban, as well as the whole lot Dumbledore caught at the Ministry two summers ago; Carlotta Wilkes and Matthias Gibbon were still alive; and no one had ever heard of a prophecy. I finally forced one of the younger Death Eaters to tell me what they knew about me, the Dark Lord, the Order, Hogwarts, Dumbledore, everything. Of course, I obliviated him afterwards. It seemed that the prophecy was non-existent in this reality. Since I'd never changed sides, though, I couldn't exactly go running back to the Order and expect them to accept me with open arms. Especially since..." Snape paused, and Harry waited for him to continue. "It seems that I was involved with the deaths of Nymphadora Tonks and Charlie Weasley last year."

Harry winced. He'd thought he had it bad—but he'd never thought of the possibility that he might've been stuck with a reputation that he didn't deserve.

“So I convinced the Dark Lord that one of my potions had exploded and I was dealing with a slight case of amnesia, but that it would pass with time.”

“And Voldemort believed you?”

Snape cringed. “Don’t speak his name!”

“I’ll say his name whenever I want,” Harry said defiantly. “I’ve faced him, and I’m not scared.

“You should be,” Snape said, eying Harry. “He’s even more powerful than in the other world.”

“And you’re saying he believed you when you told him you had amnesia.”

“The Dark Lord may be the connoisseur of Legilimency of the century,” Snape snapped, “but I am the best at Occlumency. Believe me, Potter, for years I convinced him that I was his loyal spy; I am very capable of lying to him.”

“Oh.” Harry swallowed hard as a new thought entered his mind. “Did...did you have anything to do with...you know...yesterday’s...”

“Yesterday’s carnage?” Snape finished, giving Harry a long look. “No. My job was to lay low in Hogsmeade with Bellatrix and the others and wait for you and your godfather to arrive whether in your Animagus forms or in human forms. We were to kill him and capture you.”

“Why...” Harry began, but Snape cut him off.

“I think it is high time you answered some of *my* questions, Potter.”

“I guess it’s only fair,” Harry admitted, privately thinking that there were still some things Snape wasn’t telling him. “What do you want to know?”

“Who’s the other person in the Aperio?”

“Lupin.”

Snape frowned. "I should have guessed that. Did you immediately know that you were in an Aperio?"

"No; Lupin told me a few days later. I think he guessed I'd be one of the three."

"How did he figure it out?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said, shrugging. "I guess he'd read about Aperios before."

"How many people have you told?"

"Only McGonagall and Mad-Eye Moody. Oh, and Leila too."

Snape's eyebrows shot up. "You've kept the secret well. Leila is your sister?"

"Yeah."

"Why not tell your parents or Sirius?"

Harry took a breath. "I didn't think they'd believe me. And I wasn't sure of what they'd say when they found that they were dead in the other reality."

"I see. So why did you choose to tell McGonagall and Moody?"

"You know we've been destroying Horcruxes, right?"

"Yes."

"The first one we destroyed was the diary...you know, the one Ginny Weasley wrote in all year long? It was at Hogwarts, in the Chamber of Secrets. Lupin and I went to get it one night and McGonagall overheard me telling Lupin about the Basilisk the last time I was down in the Chamber. Moody, on the other hand..." Harry blushed. He really didn't want to tell Snape that Moody had noticed his advanced Defence skills...

"Showing off in class, were you?" Snape guessed.

“Something like that,” Harry said, his face burning. “He knew there was something different about me, especially since...” He paused, unsure of whether he wanted to tell Snape about the Azkaban episode. But Snape beat him to it.

“You got the Weasley girl out of Azkaban.”

“How did you know?”

Snape pursed his lips. “I’m not sure who, but you’ve got a spy in the Order, Potter. Someone spilled everything—of course the Dark Lord doesn’t reveal everything to the lesser Death Eaters like myself, but the rumours have been flying that you and Black are Animagi, you got Weasley out of Azkaban, Lupin’s been consulting with Death Eaters and knows all about the Horcruxes, you’re a Parselmouth, Regulus Black is alive, most of the Horcruxes are destroyed...”

Harry stared at him. “They know everything.”

“Just about,” Snape said coolly.

“But how? Who would have told?” Suddenly Harry knew. “It was Luzita Clark... she’s a Death Eater, isn’t she?”

Snape frowned. “Where’d you get that idea? She’s not a Death Eater. From what I know of her and her family, she’d rather die than serve the Dark Lord.”

“Oh,” Harry said, feeling deflated. “Then who?”

“I told you, I don’t know,” Snape said impatiently. “If I knew, I’d tell you! My guess is that one of the younger members of the Order was Imperio’d and forced to tell everything.”

There was a long silence.

“You didn’t tell Lupin that I was the third, did you?”

“No,” Harry replied.

"You should," Snape said. "I doubt he'd listen if I showed up on his doorstep and tried to convince him that Dumbledore ordered me to kill him. Then maybe we can figure out how to reverse this thing."

"No!" Harry's protest came out louder than he'd intended. Snape shushed him and both quickly looked around to make sure that no one had heard. Fortunately, the Muffliato spell was still working.

"No," Harry said again, lowering his voice. "We can't go back!"

"Potter, be reasonable!" Snape exclaimed. "Just think... Even as we speak, the Dark Lord is making more Horcruxes. He personally killed your father yesterday...and Frank Longbottom. There's no stopping him now... We've got to go back."

"I won't! I won't leave Sirius...and Leila... And maybe I can still defeat Voldemort here... Lupin said that the prophecy was still valid!"

"Lupin was wrong," Snape said bluntly. "The prophecy is valid only in the other world. If you think Voldemort was bad in the old reality, you should see him in this one. He was furious when he found out that his Horcruxes had been destroyed. He won't stop until every member of the Order is dead."

"That's why we've got to keep fighting!"

"There's a difference between bravery and pure stupidity, and you're showing the latter right now. He's pretty much undefeatable."

"And he isn't in the other world?"

"You just don't get it, do you, Potter? He can be defeated in the other world. By you. In the other world, the Dark Lord doesn't know we know about the Horcruxes yet."

"I'm not leaving...now while I've got Sirius and Leila..."

Snape looked completely exasperated. "Do you know what an *Aperio* does?"

Harry shook his head.

“An Aperio technically creates a new reality, based on the key change that fulfills the wishes of the three people. In our case, it’s the prophecy that doesn’t exist in this world. But do you know what happened to the other world we were in?”

“No.”

“According to the material I read last night, there has been only one documented case of a reversed Aperio. When the three people returned to their reality, they found that for the entire period of time they’d been gone, the world had gone on, but from the perspective of their friends and families, they’d simply disappeared.”

It took a few moments for this to sink in. “You mean...”

“Everyone in the other reality woke up on the first day of summer to find that Lupin, you and I had vanished.”

“Do they know it was an Aperio?”

Snape thought for a moment. “I doubt it... I don’t think the Death Eaters will spread around the fact that I’m missing, and since Lupin isn’t well known, his disappearance won’t be widely published either. But you... well, I’ll bet the Death Eaters, the Ministry officials, and the Order are all looking for you.”

Harry groaned. “What a mess.”

“Do you see where I’m going now? No one knows you here. You have no responsibilities in this world, aside from personal ones. You owe them nothing. But think, Potter, for a minute about the people you left behind. They’re still counting on you to defeat the Dark Lord. If you leave this world, only the people you’re closest to will feel the loss. But if you remain here, the people you’ve left behind will suffer for your decision forever.”

Harry stared at his hands. He finally realised the magnitude of the decision before him. It felt as if a heavy weight had just come crashing down on his shoulders once again. To think that life in the other world was continuing without him. He couldn’t imagine what his friends must be going through... Ron and Hermione would feel guilty

for not coming with him to the Dursleys, but Mrs. Weasley would be the worst—she'd be frantic. Harry bet that she'd think his disappearance was her fault for not insisting that he come home with her at the beginning of the summer.

As he took time to think—really think—about his friends and the people he'd left behind, he realized how much he missed them. He'd allowed the excitement of having a family for once in his life carry him away. Charlie, Tonks, Hagrid, Ron and Hermione's friendship—it had seemed a small sacrifice compared to having his parents and Sirius alive. But if he went back, what would happen to this world?

"If...if we were to reverse the Aperiō, what would happen to this reality?" Harry asked numbly.

"It will continue on," Snape said tonelessly.

Harry's heart sank. "So in reality, by creating this new world, we've doomed these people to an undefeatable Voldemort."

Snape said nothing, but Harry knew the answer to the question. "If we did reverse the Aperiō, couldn't we first do something for the people here?"

"Perhaps. But you must understand that the other reality is your first priority, your first responsibility. You'll have to come to terms with the possibility that you've already done everything you possibly can here."

Silence fell once again over the table. The ancient clock over the bar read 3:15. Harry knew he should go soon... If Leila discovered him missing, she'd worry. He definitely didn't want her to put herself in danger by looking for him beyond the boundaries of Hogwarts. She knew as much as he did. If the Death Eaters captured her...

Snape was looking at the clock too. He shifted restlessly in his seat. Harry gathered his courage together for one final question.

"Why were you supposed to kill Sirius but capture me last night? Why not just kill us both?"

Snape stiffened and Harry knew he'd hit the mark. "It seems...that the Dark Lord has taken a special interest in you," he said haltingly."

Harry rolled his eyes. "What's new?"

"An attitude like that will get you killed," Snape warned. "I'm telling you, he's more powerful in this world..."

Harry really wasn't too concerned, just curious. "Why target me, though?"

"He's noticed that you're different. You're at the top of your Defence class, you become an Animagus in one summer, you're suddenly a Parselmouth, you became the first person in this world's history to escape from Azkaban, you're in the Order even though you're still in school... He's fearful."

"Fearful?"

Snape looked him straight in the eye. "My suspicion is that he's afraid you're the next heir of Slytherin."

"Me?! Why?"

"Mainly the fact that you speak Parselmouth."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "No one but Lupin, Moody, McGonagall and Leila knows that I'm a Parselmouth. How on earth could he have found out?"

Snape shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. His spies are everywhere. All I ask is that you be careful. I will do my best to inform you of what I can, but in this world I am one of the lesser Death Eaters, and I suspect that the Dark Lord is still suspicious of me, especially since I've continued to display 'signs' of Amnesia for months after the initial incident. He doesn't inform me of everything as he did in the other world. You do know that if I had known, I would have prevented your parents' deaths, don't you?"

Harry looked back at the man he once hated. He knew Snape could be lying to him...about everything...but he couldn't get over the sincerity in Snape's voice. "I know."

"You will think about what I've said?"

"Sure," Harry said noncommittally. He didn't want to think about reversing the Aperio and loosing Sirius and Leila...

"And you will tell Lupin that I am the third?" Snape's eyes were burning holes in Harry.

Finally Harry sighed. "I will."

When Harry slipped out of the Hog's Head, the streets were empty. He quickly made his way back through the town, but when he reached the main street, he realized that something was very wrong.

People were all crowding out of their shops and into the street—and they were all looking in the direction of the castle and talking excitedly. Harry could only catch bits and pieces of their conversation:

"Good Merlin..."

"...stay here, or go?"

"I never thought I'd see the day..."

"They must have gone through the other entrance..."

"I didn't see them, did you?"

"Do you know if anyone's died?"

"Someone must have died....just look at it!"

With difficulty, Harry threaded his way through the crowd and pushed his way to the front. What he saw made his blood run cold in fear.

Surrounded by blue sky and white puffy clouds, the Dark Mark was hanging ominously over Hogwarts.

Author's Note: At this point I hope I've explained quite a bit, though there's still a lot to explain in the coming chapters. But, if you happen to have a burning question/discrepancy you're curious about, please post your question (nicely) in the reviews, and I'll try to answer it in a little Q&A section after the next chapter.

Home sweet home. If you're waiting impatiently for another chapter, I urge you to read my other stories... hint hint! But it won't be too long of a wait. Two nights ago I was high on caffeine and stayed up until two am writing in my journal. Nineteen pages of story for you! I got it all typed out on the computer yesterday.

Seven hundred forty-four reviews. I love you guys. I'm shocked my very first HP story was such a success.

Chapter 43

Harry stared in disbelief at the Dark Mark. He felt frozen to the ground...the last time he'd seen the mark was the night of Dumbledore's death. Snape's words came back to him: *The Dark Lord has taken a special interest in you...* Harry would bet his Firebolt that the Death Eaters had come to Hogwarts to capture him. But when they didn't find him...would they torture and kill the teachers and students? He had to get back...he had to help... They couldn't hurt Sirius, or Leila, or Jeremy, or Demelza...

Harry broke into a run. He was gasping for air by the time he reached the gates. He'd never reach the castle in time. He still had a good half-mile to cover... Harry pulled off his Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it into his pocket. A moment later, he'd transformed and leapt into the air in his falcon form.

Nothing looked wrong as Harry soared closer to the castle. The green Dark Mark hung in the air, but other than that, the setting was serene.

He rode the wind currents and landed on the open window of his room. Harry transformed and gasped. The entire dorm had been torn apart, as if someone had been looking for something.

Not bothering to look around, he dashed down the stairs. To his surprise, the Common Room was packed with scared-looking Gryffindors. Some of the first years were crying.

"Harry!" Seamus and Jeremy shouted as he skidded to a halt in the doorway. "What are you doing here? How'd you get here?"

"What's happening? Where are the Death Eaters? What are you all doing in here?" Harry panted.

"When the Death Eaters attacked, there was an announcement that everyone was to get to the closest Common Room as quickly as possible," Jeremy said, his eyes wide with fear. "As soon as the last of the students who could make it were in here, the door was magically barricaded."

“Whose out there fighting the Death Eaters?”

“The teachers,” Seamus replied. “Flitwick and McGonagall are in charge... It’s like a war.”

Harry looked around. Suddenly he realised that Leila was missing.

“Where’s my sister?”

Neither Jeremy or Seamus was meeting Harry’s eyes.

“Where’s my sister?!” Harry shouted again.

“I’m sorry, mate, we don’t know where she is,” Jeremy said apologetically. “There were about twenty Gryffindors that didn’t make it back. We hope they made it to the Ravenclaw Tower, but we’re not sure.”

Harry strode over to the door. It was barricaded from top to bottom. “Reducto.”

The spell didn’t work. Neither did the unlocking charm... or any of the other spells he tried against it.

“What are you doing?” Seamus said, his face white. “The teachers want us to stay in here!”

“I have to get out! I have to find Leila...it’s me they want...” Harry said before he could stop himself.

Both Seamus and Jeremy stared at him. “*You?* Why would the Death Eaters want you?” Jeremy exclaimed.

“It’s too hard to explain,” Harry said. All the windows were barricaded as well. How could he get out?

Suddenly he hit his forehead. “I’m so stupid,” he groaned.

“What?”

Harry didn’t reply. He only dashed towards the door and up the stairs to the dorm. The window was still open. He didn’t realise that Jeremy

and Seamus had followed him until Jeremy spoke. "Um, Harry, where are you going?"

Harry spun around. His mind raced... He was out of time. "I have to find Leila."

"Why are you standing at the window? It's a hundred feet down!" Seamus said.

Harry looked out the window once again. He could see the Dark Mark hanging over Hogwarts... There was no time.

"You can't tell anyone. Promise?"

Seamus and Jeremy looked at each other. Clearly they thought he was mental. "Promise."

Harry concentrated, and a second later, he had turned into a falcon. Seamus gave a little yell and stumbled back. Jeremy looked awed.

"I'm an Animagus," Harry said once he'd transformed back. "That's how I got here."

"Wow," Jeremy said. "That's wicked!"

"Yeah, well, I'm out of time, so I'll talk to you later," Harry said sarcastically.

He transformed and flew to the windowsill. "Be careful, mate," he heard Jeremy say before he leapt into the air.

Harry circled around the castle, looking for an open window. The front gates of the castle had been barricaded as well, but Harry was pretty sure the Death Eaters hadn't simply walked up to the front doors and knocked. They must have gotten in one of the secret entrances...and searched the Gryffindor tower for Harry first.

He found an open window. Vector had left the window open to his Arithmancy classroom. Harry soared in, and transformed back. He raced to the door and flung it open.

The fourth floor corridor was empty. Harry could hear the sounds of a fight, though, somewhere in the castle. He quickly threw on his Invisibility Cloak and headed in the direction of the fighting.

Harry descended the stairs and looked for signs of the fight on the third floor. There were big black holes in some of the walls, and most of the portraits were deserted. One chandelier had fallen from the ceiling, and its pieces were scattered all over the floor. Harry ran down the next staircase and found similar signs of fighting on the second floor. Now the sounds seemed to be coming from directly underneath him.

He dashed down the last staircase that led directly to the entryway of the castle. The scene that met him made him slide to a stop, frozen.

Full battle was raging. Spells were flying everywhere. Closest to the stairs, McGonagall was locked in a fight with Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry was surprised at how quickly the Headmistress could move, seeing how old she was. Even so, Bellatrix obviously had the upper hand... McGonagall looked like she was getting tired.

On the other side of the entryway, Moody was fighting two massive Death Eaters that Harry didn't recognize. The doors to the Great Hall were open, and through them, Harry could see Daryl and Flitwick dueling Nott, Dolohov, and Avery. He ducked between the spells flying in the entryway and slipped down the right corridor, but not before aiming several Stunners at Lestrange. The last one found its mark.

McGonagall looked around, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "Potter? POTTER! Where are you?"

Harry ignored her, and slipped down the hall, knowing that if she knew he was here, she'd probably make him go back to his dorm by force. He had to find Leila.

Grubbly-Plank was lying in the corridor, but she was still breathing. Harry stepped over her and continued on, following the voices.

Slughorn came barreling down the hall, sweat dripping from his chin. He was muttering to himself. "Death Eaters...must hide...must get away..."

Harry stepped aside and let him pass. *Coward.*

Suddenly the air was split by a scream...a scream Harry recognized. He dashed towards it and when he rounded the corner, he skidded to a stop.

Leila was lying on the floor surrounded by three Death Eaters. She was screaming and writhing...Harry could see a woman Death Eater holding her Leila under the Crutiatus Curse.

"Tell me where he is!" the woman screamed before breaking the spell.

"I don't...know..." Leila spat. "And if I did, I'd never tell *you!*"

"You will tell me," the woman snarled, raising her wand again. "Do you really want more pain? Tell me where your brother is!"

She started to cast the Cruciatus Curse, but suddenly she was blasted forward into the wall. Harry turned his wand on the other two Death Eaters. They turned around, and he recognized them as the senior Crabbe and Goyle.

Crabbe looked around nervously. "W-who's t-there?" he cried.

Stupefy, Harry thought, and the red jet of light hit Crabbe in the chest. Goyle took one look at the two fallen Death Eaters and ran for his life. Harry ignored him, knowing that he was no threat. Harry would be surprised if he could even cast a decent shield...

Harry raced to Leila's side, throwing off the Invisibility Cloak. "Leila! Are you OK?"

"I'm fine," she gasped, clutching her side. "You need to get out of here, Harry, they're looking for you!"

"I know," Harry said. "Listen, I'll be fine... Take the Invisibility Cloak and the map and get out of here!"

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go help.”

“NO! I won’t leave you here!” Leila insisted. “Harry, you’re the one they want! If they get you they’ll kill you...”

“I’ll be fine!” Harry said impatiently. “I can fight. I can’t leave it to the teachers...and there are still some students out there... Not everyone made it back to dorm.”

“I’ll fight too, then!”

“No, Leila! You...you’re not experienced...they’d kill you...”

“I’m not going to hide!”

Harry gave her a long look. “Then you leave me no choice.”

Leila’s eyes widened. “Wha...”

“Imperio.”

A second later, her face softened. “I’ll take the Invisibility Cloak and hide,” she said cheerfully, seizing the cloak and map.

Harry watched her throw put the cloak on and listened to her footsteps as she left. He really hadn’t wanted to do that...but anything to keep her safe. He turned and ran back towards the entryway.

When he rounded the corner, another Death Eater had joined the fight. Moody and McGonagall were fighting back to back, throwing spells at the three Death Eaters, but they seemed to be doing fine. Harry ducked under the fire and ran down the other hallway. No one even noticed him slip by.

As he ran down the hall, he heard crying from one of the bathrooms. He stuck his head inside and found four second year Hufflepuffs huddled in a corner. They stared at him wide-eyed.

“Listen, just stay here,” Harry instructed. “You’ll be safe as long as you don’t leave, OK?”

They tearfully nodded, and he turned back to the door, quickly performing one of the spells Moody had taught him in “detention.” It made sure that no one with a Dark Mark could enter or exit the bathroom.

Once that was completed, Harry continued down the hall, looking for more students or Death Eaters. Suddenly he heard voices.

“Where is he? You promised he’d be here! Have you joined *their* side?”

“I told you, he was in his dorm all morning long... I don’t know how he’d have gotten out. I had people watching the portrait hole!”

Harry slipped around the corner. McNair was standing there, glaring threateningly at... Clark?

“I swear, he’s here somewhere,” she insisted, glaring back at him. “And as for your other question, I have always been loyal to the Dark Lord and I always will be!”

Harry moved quickly. “Stupefy!” he shouted, and McNair crumpled to the ground. Clark spun around, eyes wide.

“You,” she growled.

Harry kept his wand up, and hers was pointed straight at him. He remembered Moody’s instruction—“When you’re in a duel, wait for the other person to cast the first spell.”

“You’re a Death Eater,” Harry accused.

She smiled maliciously. “You finally figured it out, Potter. Too bad it’s too late to warn your friends...”

“You told Voldemort everything!”

“I did.”

They were circling each other now. “Stupefy,” she suddenly yelled, and Harry conjured the fastest shield he’d ever pulled up.

“Very good, Potter. I can see Moody’s been teaching you well.”

“You’re a traitor,” Harry spat. “You sold us out to Voldemort. You sold us out to the one who killed your parents.”

Clark licked her lips. “You got the two first right, but you’re wrong about the last one. Voldemort never killed my parents.”

She took advantage of Harry’s surprise and fired several more spells at him. He just barely dodged them.

“Liar! Moody said both your parents and grandparents were killed by Death Eaters!”

“Oh, Harry, Harry,” she said condolingly. “You’re still going by appearances, aren’t you?”

Harry stared at her for a moment before realising what she meant. “You’re not Luzita Clark?”

Her icy grey eyes narrowed. “Took you long enough to figure it out. I thought you were smarter than that, Potter. Now you’ll suffer the consequences for your stupidity. Expelliarmus!”

Harry threw up another shield, still moving in circles. She battered his shield with several curses, and just as it began to crack, Harry let it down and threw himself aside as a Reducto curse smashed the statue of Gertrude the Generous to pieces.

“Who are you, then?” Harry shouted, dodging another barrage of spells. “What did you do with Clark?”

“Oh, Luzita’s been dead for quite some time, now,” the woman said carelessly. “I’ll tell you who I am... It won’t matter anyway; the Dark Lord will finish you off soon enough.”

Harry watched in horror as her features began to melt away. She became shorter, her brown hair turned blonde, and her face became straighter. Only her eyes remained the same. Icy gray.

“Narcissa Malfoy,” Harry breathed, mouth open in shock.

She smiled faintly. "Finally you guess the right answer."

"You...you're... you're a..."

"I believe the word you're looking for is 'Metamorphagus,' Potter," she said.

"I thought... I mean..."

"You thought the only person in my family blessed with that particular talent was Nymphadora, did you?"

"I..."

"And that is why the Order is never going to win," she finished. "They trust too easily, assume too little, and are far too careless with their information."

A second later, Harry felt two people seize his arms. He'd been so engrossed in her revelation, that he hadn't heard two Death Eaters approach behind him...

"Expeliarimus," Narcissa said coldly, and Harry's wand flew out of his hand. Harry struggled against the two men, but to no avail. Narcissa watched him with a satisfied look in her eye. "Transform, Potter, and you're dead."

"What should we do with him?" Nott Senior asked the woman.

"Stun him and take him to Headquarters," she said lazily. "No, wait...I'll stun him. It will give me great pleasure to see the little brat dead...but stunning will have to work for now."

Harry closed his eyes. He knew what was coming.

"Stupefy," she said triumphantly, and everything went black.

Author's Note: The idea of Narcissa Malfoy being a Metamorphagus and posing as a teacher to get to Harry is unfortunately not mine. It comes from a story called Harry Potter and the Power of Emotion, by

Melandrio. One of my reviewers also mentioned seeing similarities between The World as We Knew It and another story called Destiny Reversed. Destiny Reversed by chattypandagurl. ChattyPandagirl's story was my *inspiration* for this one. This information has been on my profile page ever since I started writing my story. I think, though, that you will find that beyond the first chapter, our stories are very different.

On to the questions that were posted:

Why can Harry still speak Parseltongue if his scar is gone? I have decided to make Parseltongue an ability that doesn't go away with the vanishing of the scar. He's spoken it before, and it is one of his permanent capabilities.

Snape was acting very un-Snapeish. Was he just trying to play nice or is there something else going on? You're right; Snape is being nice. Mainly because he's just so desperate for information, and after five months of thinking he was going crazy in the new reality, he was actually *glad* to see Harry, believe it or not.

How come Snape knew that Clark wasn't a Death Eater? Because all the Death Eaters attend meetings, silly! He'd have recognized Clark. She is pretty well-known in Britain. And he was right... Clark wasn't a Death Eater! She remained loyal! It was Narcissa Malfoy posing as Clark.

Why is the Dark Mark over Hogwarts? Did someone die? Yes. One of the minor teachers did die. The Muggle Studies professor, to be precise.

Is it possible for other people to join them going back to their world? This is the best question I've been asked yet! I know the answer... but I'm not going to tell. All I'll say is, it has never been done before and would be *extremely* difficult.

Please tell me his sister isn't going to die. No. I solemnly swear not to kill off Leila. *But you don't know how close Sirius came to dying in this chapter...* I practically had his death written... then decided at the last moment that it'd just be too cruel. So I let him live. And he won't die later, either. I promise.

What has happened to Pettigrew? He's playing the faithful little Death Eater.

The Horcrux hunt hasn't been very interesting. *Sighs.* I know. I didn't feel like writing long drama-filled Horcrux-destruction chapters. I wanted the story to be based on other, more important plotlines, so I let the Order members deal with the Horcruxes.

And for the person who begged me not to write any fluff in this story... I will try. But it's hard to write a story without a bit of Harry/Ginny fluff...

What about Cho and Hermione? Patience, people, patience! You'll meet them. It may not be until chapter fifty, but you'll meet them.

Thanks for reading! Now go review...on pain of the horrible PurpleEyebrows Curse...

Again, ask your questions in reviews and I'll answer them if I can do so without giving too much away.

Chapter 44

When Harry awoke, the first two things he sensed were darkness and pain. Wherever he was, it must either be nighttime, or the room was light-proof. Harry couldn't see a single pinpoint of light.

He ached from head to foot. Groaning, Harry pushed himself into a sitting position and took a physical examination of himself. His left cheek was swollen, and the glass in one of his lenses was cracked. The rest of him seemed to be alright, except for one knee that wouldn't stop throbbing.

Harry struggled to remember what had happened. Where was he anyway? He slowly stood, keeping his weight on his left leg. A quick inspection of the room revealed that he was in a cell only about twelve feet square. In one corner, Harry found a locked door, probably made of some type of heavy metal. Other than that, the room was empty. Harry couldn't tell how high the ceiling was, only that there were no windows within his reach. Finally he situated himself in the farthest corner from the door. The pockets of his jeans were empty and Harry noticed his school robes had disappeared, along with his wand.

Harry crossed his arms and pulled his legs up to his chest to preserve heat. The cell was chilly, but not painfully cold—yet. If it was still daytime—Harry wasn't exactly sure—come nighttime his thin shirt wouldn't do much against the freezing November wind.

How had he gotten here? What had happened? Harry leaned back against the wall and tried to remember. He'd been playing Quidditch... They'd won, and then Lupin had told him about his parents' deaths. Harry closed his eyes as the shock of their murders washed over him again. *Voldemort killed Dad, Bellatrix finished off my mum*, he thought bitterly. *I suppose I've got personal scores to settle with both of them now.*

He forced his mind to continue. He and Leila had been sitting in the Common Room, then he'd gone after Sirius. There was a Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade. Harry hoped Sirius was safe.

Then Harry's mind reeled as he remembered the discovery that Snape was the third person in the Aperio. He'd had apparated Sirius back to the gates... Oh yeah. He'd met Snape at the Hog's Head the following day and they'd sorted things out. Then he had gone to the castle...

Suddenly it all came flooding back: The Dark Mark hanging in the sky, the Death Eaters in Hogwarts, forcing Leila to hide, confronting Luzita Clark, discovering that she was really Narcissa Malfoy...

Harry groaned again. He was being held by Death Eaters! Death Eaters who thought he was either the heir of Slytherin, or else he was hiding something important.

How on earth was he going to get out of this one?

Several hours passed, and finally Harry fell into a restless sleep. He awoke later—though he wasn't sure how much later—to the creak of the door opening.

Harry threw up both hands. The light was piercing into his skull. It felt like someone had set off a dozen fireworks inside his skull. Fortunately, the light was gone a moment later and the door closed with a clang.

Harry opened his eyes again, wondering why someone had come and gone so quickly. Then it occurred to him that whoever had ventured into his cell might have left something behind. Body aching from the hard floor, Harry crawled in the direction of the door, one hand feeling the floor in front of him. Soon he found a jug and a plate. The jug was filled with water; Harry gulped it down. The plate was filled with a few crusts of bread, which Harry also ate, but with less enthusiasm. He knew he'd need his strength later on for whatever came.

Time passed. Harry slept again, but when he woke, nothing had changed. Again he wondered why he was here. What did they want? Why hadn't they questioned—or even less pleasant to think about—tortured him yet? What was going on?

With no way to tell time, Harry could only assume that an entire day had passed when someone brought him another jug of water and a plate. When the door clanged shut, Harry dove for the food and water; his thirst and hunger had become painful. The bread was devoured almost immediately, but Harry forced himself to save most of the water for later.

More hours went by. Slow, tedious, anxious hours, that seemed to crawl. Sometimes Harry wondered if they meant to leave him here forever. It was a frightening thought—in his Muggle primary school he'd read about men who'd gone crazy when they were isolated in complete darkness during World War II. Harry wondered how long it would take him to go crazy. The hours of waiting in the darkness, unsure of what was going to happen to him, were beginning to affect him. He even had the passing thought that maybe Azkaban was better than this.

A third time, some unknown person brought him food. This time, Harry had made the water stretch until the next jug came. Again, he wondered how many more days would pass before he finally learned why he was here and what they wanted from him.

He didn't have long to wait.

Not ten minutes later, the door clanged open unexpectedly, and again, Harry threw his arm over his eyes to block the light painfully piercing his head. But this time, the light didn't go away. He could hear footsteps approaching, and suddenly he was being hauled to his feet by two men.

"Time to go, kid," one man growled. Harry was pulled out of his cell into the blinding light, and the door shut behind him.

"Forgot how to walk, Potter?" the other man sneered, and jerked Harry roughly. Harry tried to make his legs work, but his right knee would no longer support his weight. He thought it might be sprained. His head was spinning, and even though his eyes were tightly closed, he could tell they were passing through quite a few corridors and up several staircases. When they finally reached a grim-looking door, Harry's eyes were almost completely adjusted to the light. But when they entered the room, Harry almost wished he couldn't see anything.

The two men—presumably Death Eaters—dumped Harry unceremoniously on the stone floor, then left. Harry was alone in the severe room—alone with the one person he thought he thought he might hate even more than Voldemort himself: Bellatrix Lestrange.

“So nice of you to drop in, Potter,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“You,” Harry snarled. “Get away from me, you hag!”

She pouted. “I can see that I’m going to have to teach you some manners, aren’t I? *Crucio!*”

Harry had not time to prepare, no warning at all. The curse struck him in the chest. He was unable to stop the cry that escaped his lips as the pain poured into his body, coursing through his veins. It felt as if his very bones were on fire. He writhed and thrashed on the stone floor... He’d do anything to make it end. Anything would be better than this! Even death. *Just kill me now*, he silently pleaded.

Finally, she lifted the curse. “That hurt, didn’t it, Potty? I really don’t want to have to do that again. Now just answer my questions.”

Harry finally recovered his breath. “I would rather die.”

Bellatrix leered at him. “We might be able to arrange that. But not until you answer some questions.”

“Never!”

She shook her head. “Tut, tut, that’s not the right attitude. I guess we’ll just have to loosen your tongue somehow. *Crucio!*”

This time, Harry had seen her wand flick and had braced himself. He bit his lip until blood came as the waves of agony racked his body, but not once did he cry out.

This seemed to make Bellatrix even more angry, but she finally lifted the curse.

“Ready to talk, now?”

“No.”

“Oh, but you will be soon...by the time I’m done with you!”

“How am I supposed to answer your questions?” Harry shot at her. “I don’t even know why I’m here.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you?”

Harry didn’t reply. Could she read minds? He hoped not; if she knew Legilimency like Snape, he’d really be in trouble.

“How’d you learn Parseltongue?”

The question threw Harry off guard. Why did they want to know about his being a Parselmouth? Oh, yeah. They thought he was the Heir of Slytherin.

He thought about not answering, but decided to tell the truth whenever he could. “I’ve been able to speak it ever since I was little.”

Bellatrix’s eyes widened. “Why are you a Parselmouth?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. I guess I was born with it.” *Let them think I’m the Heir of Slytherin. As long as they don’t find out about the Aperio. And the Prophecy. And Snape.*

“What are you hiding?”

What a question. *Just about everything*, Harry thought. “Nothing,” he replied.

“You’re lying!” she screamed, working herself into a frenzy. She put the Crucio on Harry a third time, but lifted it quickly. *She wants information.*

“Where is Remus Lupin?”

This question also startled Harry. What did the Death Eaters want with Lupin? Did they know that Regulus and Ginny were hiding at his house? Harry knew what would happen if they captured Regulus—

he'd suffer a long, painful death for his treachery. He didn't want to think about what they'd do to Ginny.

"Gee, I don't know," Harry replied sarcastically. "Have you tried his house?"

"You know where he is!"

"No, I don't," Harry insisted impatiently. "If I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

She cried out in fury. Harry thought she was going to Crucio him again, but she didn't *She's probably been ordered not to torture me into insanity.*

"Where does he live?"

Did they suspect that he was Lupin's Secret-keeper? "Haven't the foggiest idea."

"You know! You're lying to me! Tell me where he lives!"

"How should I know? I've never been to his house!"

The last part was the truth. Harry was surprised at how easily he was lying. Unfortunately, Bellatrix wasn't easily fooled.

"Liar! *Crucio!*"

A half hour later, Harry was barely conscious as the two burley Death Eaters dragged him back to this cell. This time, though, he actually welcomed the darkness that closed in around him like a blanket. He lay on the stone floor, unable to move from where his escorts had dumped him, every bone in his body aching painfully from the aftereffects of one too many Crucios.

Most of the questions had been about Lupin: Where was he? Where did he live? What were his haunts? What was the relationship between him and Harry? Harry couldn't understand it; why were they so interested in Lupin? Had the Death Eaters guessed Harry's connection with the werewolf? What did they want with him? Would they try to capture him as they had Harry? Had they guessed that

Harry was his Secret-keeper? Maybe. Bellatrix had automatically assumed that Harry knew where Lupin lived. But how did the Death Eaters know? Had Sirius been captured? He'd been the only other one Harry had told besides McGonagall.

Besides the Lupin-related questions, Bellatrix had asked Harry a lot of personal questions: About his Parselmouth abilities, about his other Defence skills, his involvement with the order, his rescue of Ginny from Azkaban, etc., etc. Good grief, if he was the Heir of Slytherin and his magical powers had suddenly multiplied on his seventeenth birthday like the Death Eaters seemed to think, he would've escaped by now.

They'd also wanted to know the locations of many Order members, including Regulus Black. This made Harry believe that they didn't yet know that Regulus and Ginny were at Lupin's house, thank Merlin.

Questions, questions, always questions, but no answers. Exhausted from the ordeal, Harry fell into a restless sleep.

Harry soon lost track of the days. Now, he dreaded the clang of the opening door, never knowing whether the visitor was bringing him food or taking him to another interrogation. Every day he was dragged to the same room and tortured for information. Some days, he was questioned more than once.

Fortunately, it wasn't always Bellatrix. Harry much preferred the times when Dolohov, Avery, or McNair acted as his inquisitor. For one, they quickly became bored with the Crucio curse and resorted to Muggle methods—kicking and punching, mainly. As long as they didn't pull his fingernails out, or roast him over a low fire, Harry would gladly take the Muggle tortures over the Cruciatus Curse any day.

The Muggle methods came at a cost, though. Harry was pretty sure several of his ribs were broken; one eye was swollen shut, and the rest of his body felt like one big bruise. Harry had discovered days before that it was far too taxing to hold in all of his cries during the beatings; only when Bellatrix was present did he bite his lip and refuse to make a sound when she put the Crucio curse on him repeatedly.

He refused to give her the satisfaction. He would never show signs of weakness in front of her if he could help it.

When she was around, Harry had to fight to stay in control of himself. She mocked him whenever he could, calling Lily a Mudblood and telling him how his mother had begged for mercy before her death. The only way Harry kept himself from lashing out at her—an action that he knew would only cause himself more pain in the long run—was by dwelling on the sweet revenge he'd have on her one day...one day when he had a wand and she didn't. He didn't care whether it was this world's Bellatrix or the other world's...both deserved to die horrible deaths as far as he was concerned.

He had still not figured out why the Death Eaters wanted Lupin so badly—they were keeping that information to themselves. They continued to badger Harry about the location of Lupin's house, and every day he avidly refused to tell them what they wanted to know. But every day, Harry felt himself growing weaker. Every night when they threw him back into his dark prison, it was a little harder to lift the jug of water to his mouth for a few precious swallows of water.

When would they give up? Harry's resolve was still strong—he would die before he gave away Lupin's location. Betraying Lupin would also mean handing over Regulus and Ginny to the Death Eaters as well. But Harry wondered sometimes... How much more could he take before he broke? The Death Eaters were relentless.

That was what he was thinking about as he lay on the cold floor one night trying to ignore the pain that was keeping him from sleeping. Harry was used to pain—he'd been in more Quidditch accidents than he cared to remember. But this was different. Every time he breathed, it felt as if someone was pushing a dagger into his chest. He shivered, trying to ignore the cold chill that made the room feel like an icebox.

Suddenly without warning, the door swung open. Harry closed his eyes to the light, not having the energy to lift an arm. His stomach filled with dread. What were they doing here again?

"You've got a visitor, Potter," Dolohov sneered.

Harry gritted his teeth as Dolohov and Avery lifted him up and roughly dragged him through the corridors. This time, though, they took different turns. Finally the three reached another cell. Dolohov pulled out his wand and unlocked the door. He and Avery roughly pushed Harry inside.

Harry hit the floor and lay there, completely drained of the energy needed to push himself up.

There was a gasp from nearby. Then someone whispered, "Oh, dear god. What have they done to you, Harry?"

Gentle hands were pushing Harry over onto his back. Harry sucked in his breath sharply as the person touched a sensitive spot on his side.

"Harry! Harry, can you hear me?"

With effort, Harry opened the eye that wasn't swollen shut, and what he saw made all his hopes vanish.

Remus Lupin was leaning over him.

Author's Note: I know, I know...I'm the goddess of cliffs, huh? I'm sorry. *Tries desperately to look remorseful.* And to those of you who begged me for some Harry/Ginny fluff in this story, I've changed my mind. There will be some. Mind you, not a lot, but a little. It is a Harry/Ginny story, after all.

OMG, 810 reviews! Oh please, please, please, review! We can make it to 1000... I just know it...

Chapter 45 – The Full Moon Approaches. Coming soon. And for those of you who wondered, I'm planning on about sixty chapters. But this story might end at chapter fifty and I'll write a sequel...I'm not sure yet.

Chapter 45

“Oh, god, Harry.”

There was a sound of ripping cloth, and a moment later a wet rag was being pressed to Harry’s bruised eye. It felt marvelous.

“Remus,” Harry choked.

“Don’t talk,” the werewolf instructed.

“But...how... I promise, I swear I didn’t...”

“Everything will be OK,” Lupin said unconvincingly. “Just lie still.”

But Harry had to tell him. He had to make him understand. “I swear... I didn’t tell... I didn’t tell them where you lived.”

“I know,” Lupin said quietly. “Don’t worry. Regulus and Ginny are still safe.”

“Then how...”

“I walked into a trap,” Lupin sighed. “I was a bleeding idiot. Here, drink some water.”

He supported Harry’s head and tipped the water jug for him. Any other time, Harry would have been embarrassed, but now he was in too much pain to care.

“Now sleep.”

Harry was in no mood to argue. Lupin pushed something soft under his head, and he slept.

When he woke, Lupin was gone. Harry wondered if it’d all been a dream, but no, he was still in the larger cell. This one wasn’t completely dark; shafts of light trickled in from rooms above. The cloth still resting over his left eye was dried out, but nevertheless, present. So where was Lupin?

The obvious answer was that Lupin was being interrogated by Death Eaters. Harry inwardly winced. It was one thing to be tortured, but another altogether to imagine the torture Lupin might be enduring.

Harry lay back and tried to think of other things as he waited for Lupin to return.

Fortunately, he didn't have long to wait.

Fifteen minutes had passed when the door swung open and Lupin stumbled in, gasping for breath. He was haggard and tired and a cut bled freely down his cheek, but other than that, he didn't look too bad.

Lupin collapsed onto the floor and Harry attempted to sit up, meaning to ask his former DADA teacher if he was alright. He didn't quite make it though, and ended up propped on his elbows, gasping as knives pierced his side.

"Harry, lie back down," Lupin commanded gently.

"No... I'm fine..."

Lupin laughed a little. "You've always been good at stating the exact opposite of the obvious," he told Harry. "Now lie down before you hurt yourself. You look like hell."

"Thanks a lot!" Harry said, but he grudgingly obeyed. "Are you alright?"

"Fine and dandy," Lupin replied, though he looked anything but fine and dandy. He glanced around the room. "Do you suppose it's safe to talk in here?" he said, echoing Harry's own thoughts.

"Don't know," Harry rasped. There was much he needed to tell Lupin, but he certainly hadn't planned on this particular location.

Lupin bit his lip. "I'm pretty sure this room isn't under any kind of wizarding surveillance, and I *know* the Death Eaters aren't intelligence enough to use Muggle bugging systems."

Harry's chuckle quickly turned into a gasp as pain coursed through his chest. Lupin sent him a sympathetic glance.

"I wish I had a wand... I'd take care of those broken ribs and bruises for you."

"It's OK," Harry said. He was determined to get answers out of Lupin. "How'd you get captured?"

"I'm telling you, I was an idiot," said Lupin, sighing again. "After you were captured, I nearly went crazy with worry. Sirius, McGonagall, and I were the only ones looking for you... Everyone else has gone into hiding. The other Order members thought Voldemort was holding you as bait to try to trap the rest of us. McGonagall and I knew the truth, though. And Sirius..."

"He must have been frantic," Harry finished.

Lupin nodded. "Anyway, when a Death Eater offered to give me information about your location, I agreed. I walked into the Black Dragon, right into the trap. I wasn't even smart enough to take along backup."

"Sounds like me," Harry said, grimacing. "I knew the Death Eaters were after me... But I went charging into Hogwarts anyway, bent on stopping all of them single-handedly. Do you know what happened at the school after I was taken? Did anyone get killed? Were any students killed?"

"The students are safe," Lupin reassured him. "Like you said, the Death Eaters just wanted you. One teacher is dead—Haluska, the Muggle Studies professor. Two Death Eaters were captured."

"Oh."

"How'd you get captured anyway?"

"It was Clark," Harry explained, feeling ashamed. "She caught me off guard. It was enough of a shock to see her morphing into Narcissa Malfoy, and then two Death Eaters snuck up behind me..."

“*Narcissa Malfoy*?” Lupin said, incredulous. “Hang on... Clark was a Metamorphagus?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, puzzled. “You didn’t know?”

Lupin shook his head. “McGonagall saw her leave with the Death Eaters. She just assumed that Luzita was on their side.”

“Clark—the real Clark—has been dead for months,” Harry said, sighing. “I can’t believe we never considered the possibility that Tonks’s relatives might have her abilities as well.”

“If Narcissa is a Metamorphagus, the Order is in serious trouble,” Lupin said, his face pale. “When we get out of here we’ve got to tell them.”

“If we get out of here,” Harry said glumly.

Lupin made no reply.

“I can’t believe Narcissa was sitting there in the Order meeting the whole time and no one figured it out,” Harry said. “Moody and I could sense that something was wrong, but he’d already checked to make sure she wasn’t under Polyjuice and didn’t have a Dark Mark.”

“And the rest of us blindly trusted her,” Lupin finished. “By the gods, we’ve paid for our error with blood.”

Harry fell silent. Lupin was looking around the cell. “How on earth are we going to get out of here?” he muttered. Then he looked back at Harry and took a breath. “Merlin, Harry, I’m so sorry... I’ve made a mess of this entire thing. I consider myself solely responsible for the deaths and for our capture.

“Two of three in the *Aperio*,” he continued bitterly, now more to himself than Harry. “If we die here, we’ll never find the third... Never reverse the *Aperio*...”

Harry gulped. “Uh, actually...” he started, then stopped. Lupin was looking at him curiously. Better get it out quickly. “I found out who the third person is,” he said in one breath.

Lupin looked as if he'd just been informed that the sky was actually pink and Death Eaters were nice people deep down inside. "*Who?*"

"Snape."

Haltingly, Harry told the entire story, pausing frequently for deep breaths of air. When Harry had finished, Lupin closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

"I am so blind," he finally said. "The answer was there, all this time, but I was too stupid to see it..."

"So you believe Snape?"

Lupin gave Harry a long look. "Yes, I do."

"He could be making it up."

"He could," Lupin acknowledged. "But I don't think he is."

"Why?"

"For one thing, I know that he and Lily used to be close friends. I was there. He isn't lying about liking your mother, and he can't be lying about regretting your parents' deaths or we wouldn't be here in this reality, would we? Since he's not lying about the first two, I'm inclined to think he's telling the truth about Dumbledore's death and his loyalties."

Harry frowned. "I believe him too, but I still can't figure out why he wanted my dad alive again."

Lupin thought about this. "I don't think it's so much a case of wishing your father was alive because Snape liked James as a person, Harry. I imagine, though, if Snape has any feelings at all, he was regretting killing Dumbledore and possibly regretting his part in your parents' deaths as well. Guilt is a terrible thing to live with."

"So you're saying he might have wished them alive just so he wouldn't feel guilty?"

“Exactly.”

Harry nodded. It made sense, if just a little out of character on Snape’s part. But so many impossible things had happened so far... In this world, it seemed that anything was possible.

“There’s still one thing I don’t get,” Harry said, thinking aloud. “What do the Death Eaters want from you? They kept pressuring me to give away your location. They wanted you, but why?”

Lupin sighed. “Think, Harry. Who presented the Order with the brilliant idea of hunting Horcruxes in the first place?”

Harry groaned. “Clark—I mean Narcissa—found that out, huh?”

Lupin nodded. “Somehow she walked into a single Order meeting and walked out with all our secrets. I don’t know how she did it.”

“So I’ll be the Death Eaters want to know who you acquired the information from in the first place.”

“Exactly.”

Harry grinned painfully. “I suppose you’ve got it tougher than me. D’you know why they’re interested in me?”

Lupin shook his head. “Do tell.”

“Snape figures they think I’m the next Heir of Slytherin. Speaking Parseltongue, rescuing Ginny from Azkaban, hunting Horcruxes with the Order, fighting Death Eaters...”

Lupin actually laughed. “Keep making them think that, Harry. It’s the best cover you’ll get.”

“There’s one thing I still don’t get,” Harry admitted. “How on earth did Clark find out I can talk to snakes...?” The answer suddenly hit him and he trailed off. “Oh Merlin... I’m so stupid.”

“What?”

"We had to Vanish snakes in Transfiguration class," Harry explained. "They all started looking at me. I put the Muffliato spell up and told them to cut it out, but I think Clark must have noticed something."

Lupin looked serious. "Harry, keep playing the whole Heir of Slytherin thing as long as you can, but whatever you do, don't tell the Death Eaters about the Aperio! That secret must be kept at all costs."

Harry nodded. "'Cause if he finds out about the Aperio, he'll guess that the third is Snape, and then terminate us one by one."

"Precisely." Then Lupin brightened visibly. "But we've still got Snape, don't we? Maybe he'll figure out where we are and get us out."

"Maybe," Harry said doubtfully. Voldemort was too wary of Snape. The Potions master hadn't even been informed of the Hogwarts attack, after all. Harry told Lupin of his fears.

"You're probably right," Lupin admitted, his shoulders slumping. "But hope is the only thing we have right now."

Now that they had Lupin, the Death Eaters seemed to lose interest with Harry. They seemed to think that Lupin had all the answers. Now when the cell door clanged open, Lupin was the one who disappeared and came back looking beat up and weary. Harry was only pulled out of his cell once every few days when the Death Eaters wanted someone to rough up for fun. Once in a while, Bellatrix would interrogate him again, but not often. This gave him longer periods of time to recover, for which Harry was grateful; still, healing was slow. The lack of decent food was getting to him; his clothes hung awkwardly over his skin-and-bones body, and Harry knew that if he lifted his shirt, he'd be able to count every one of his ribs.

Lupin was looking worse every day as more cuts and bruises were daily piled onto the already large collection that had barely begun the process of healing. Harry became increasingly worried about Lupin, but every time he mentioned his concerns, Lupin brushed it off. "I'm OK, Harry," Lupin would say lightly. "They've forgotten that I'm a werewolf. We're practically indestructible, and I'm accustomed to lots of pain every full moon. You should be more worried about yourself."

Harry let the topic go, but he still watched Lupin closely. He was still very weak himself, and it alarmed him to see Lupin's health deteriorating even more quickly than his own. Nevertheless, the werewolf remained optimistic that help would come. As the long days and even longer nights passed, though, Harry wasn't nearly as hopeful.

Then one day, as Harry was nursing his latest collection of wounds, the cell door swung open and Lupin stumbled in. Immediately Harry knew something was wrong.

"Remus, what happened?"

Lupin slid to the floor, his back to one of the walls. His face was white as a sheet, and his hands were shaking. Despite Harry's attempts to find out what had shaken up his friend so badly, Lupin did nothing but shake his head and stare unseeingly at the opposite wall. Harry fell asleep frustrated and angry. What could have possibly happened to affect Lupin this forcibly?

Two days later, he found out.

"We're here for Potter," McNair growled from the door. Harry didn't resist as McNair and Dolohov hauled him to his feet. Lupin watched them go with a strange, haunted look in his eyes.

Bellatrix was waiting for Harry in the interrogation room. Harry knew the routine by now: Crucio, questions, Crucio, questions, more questions, Crucio, insults regarding his parents, Crucio... But this time, Bellatrix cut Harry off in the middle of his carefully rehearsed answer.

"You disgust me," she said, moving closer and spitting in Harry's face.

"Believe me, the feeling is mutual," Harry muttered, wearily wiping the saliva from his cheek.

"Only two more days, and you'll be dead," she sneered. "You're nothing but slime on the ground, and I will be glad to be rid of you."

Harry stared at her, not understanding. "What are you talking about?"

Bellatrix's eyes widened, and she gave a little scream of laughter. "Little Potty doesn't know? The werewolf never told you?"

"Told me what?" Harry said, starting to feel alarmed. What on earth was she getting at? He tried to ignore the pain in his limbs...tried to focus...

She leered at him. "Guess what will happen two days from now?"

"Oh, let me guess," Harry said sarcastically. "Voldemort's going to surrender, make a public statement apologizing for the havoc he's caused in the Wizarding world, and go willingly to Azkaban."

"Wrong," Bellatrix sneered. "It's a full moon."

"I don't see what that has to do with..."

"Stupid boy," she shrieked. "Think! Where do you think you'll be on the full moon?"

It took a full ten seconds for the true meaning of her words to sink in. Harry stared at her, horrified.

The corners of Bellatrix's mouth curled up into a purely evil smile. "Poor Harry," she said unsympathetically. "Locked in a cell with a werewolf on the night of the full moon. Torn to pieces by his own friend. And think of the poor werewolf, having to live with the knowledge that he killed his own best friend's son."

Harry felt like he'd be sick; bile was rising up in his throat, but he forced it back, willing himself not to throw up. "You're sick," he choked out.

Bellatrix just laughed. She taunted him some more, but Harry wasn't listening. He hardly noticed when Dolohov and McNair arrived to take him back to the cell. His mind was spinning, stuck like a broken CD on one thought: *They're going to let Lupin tear me to pieces at the full moon.*

The two Death Eaters shoved Harry back into the cell, where he collapsed on the floor, hardly aware of his surroundings. *I've only got two more days to live.*

"So they told you."

Harry looked up. Lupin was staring past him with a hollow gaze.

"Yeah."

Suddenly Harry could take it no longer. He leaned over and vomited onto the floor. When he finally pushed himself back up into a sitting position and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, he felt better.

He rounded on Lupin. "When were you planning on telling me the truth?" Harry said angrily, glaring at his former professor.

Lupin looked at him, and Harry shuddered. It was the look of a man who had nothing left to live for.

"When were you going to tell me?" Harry said again.

"I tried... I just couldn't say it," Lupin whispered dropping his gaze.

"Well, you should have told me," Harry said stiffly. "I had to find out from Bellatrix Lestrange."

Lupin suddenly buried his head in his hands. His whole body shook. "Harry... Oh god..."

"Don't talk to me."

Lupin's hands dropped. "You're not the one who's about to involuntarily murder the only person he's ever considered a son," he whispered.

"Well, you're not the one who's about to suffer a horrible death," Harry shot back. "Torn to pieces by a savage werewolf!"

"You won't have to live with the guilt for the rest of your life!" Lupin cried.

“Well, considering the options, I think I’d rather be in your place right now,” Harry said angrily, his eyes flashing.

Lupin gave him a long look. “Would you?”

Harry’s anger fell to pieces. “No,” he admitted, leaning back against the wall. “No, I wouldn’t.”

They fell into an uneasy silence. Harry stared at the ceiling and tried desperately to think his way out of the situation.

“Listen,” he finally said firmly. “We’ve got two days before the full moon. Anything can happen in two days. Snape could come. Or maybe we could break out or come up with a plan or something.”

Lupin looked up. “Of course, you’re right,” he said, his voice dull and lifeless. “We’ve still got two days.”

“That’s right,” Harry said. “Two days.”

Suddenly a glimmer of hope flashed through Lupin’s eyes. “Harry... Harry, you’re an Animagus!”

Harry shook his head. “It won’t work. In my old cell I tried transforming when I got too cold, but it wouldn’t work. Then I overheard several Death Eaters congratulating themselves on remembering to place the anti-Animagus wards all around the building.”

Lupin’s shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

And there really wasn’t much else to say. No one came the next day and Harry tried not to think about how thirsty and hungry he was. The Death Eaters probably figured he’d be dead in another day anyway, so why waste food?

Harry struggled to keep from thinking about the following night. But somehow, his mind kept bringing him back to the night at the Shrieking Shack his third year, when Lupin had turned into a werewolf. Then he could see the same werewolf stalking him,

snarling and growling. The werewolf pounced, and sank its canine teeth into Harry's flesh...

Lupin retreated still further, refusing to speak to Harry at all. The only thing worse than thinking about the painful death he was facing, was thinking about what Lupin must be going through.

Another sleepless night passed. Then it was the day of the full moon. Lupin was beginning to look more and more haggard. His breaths were coming in short gasps, and his eyes were becoming bloodshot. Harry had to fight the urge to retreat to the farthest corner—he couldn't deny that seeing his mild DADA professor slowly turning into a monster shook him up immensely.

The cell door clanged open around mid-morning. Bellatrix was there.

"Your time is running out," she sneered.

"Are you joking? I thought we had at least another couple hours left," Harry said snidely.

She narrowed her eyes. "You don't deserve any more chances, filthy half-blood. But the Dark Lord is more merciful than I, and he will give you one more opportunity to redeem yourselves."

Harry waited.

"Tell us the location of Regulus Black, and your life will be spared."

"No."

"Harry, tell her!" Lupin's strangled voice carried across the room.

"No."

"It's your last chance, worm," Bellatrix said.

"No."

She took another long look at him. Then she spat at him. "May your death be long and painful," she said coldly. Then she left.

"You should have told her," Lupin said, breathing heavily. His eyes were rolling back into his head.

Harry glared at him. "After all these weeks of torture? Finally give in and betray Regulus, Ginny, and probably Sirius as well? I'd rather die."

They lapsed into silence again. Several hours passed, and Lupin's back was beginning to arch. His eyes were turning red, his hair sticking straight up, and his breathing even more ragged. Harry tried to ignore him...tried to think of something, anything else, but there was nothing he could do but sit there and watch the transformation begin.

"Harry..." Lupin suddenly said in a hoarse voice.

"Yes?"

"Harry, I'm... I'm sorry..."

"It's OK." Although it wasn't. Harry had gone back and forth from hating Lupin to feeling sorry for him many times that day. He wasn't sure how to feel.

"No... it's not..."

"Yes, it is," Harry said firmly. Even if it really *wasn't* OK, he wanted Lupin to think it was.

"You know...if I could...I'd kill myself first."

Harry looked at him, surprised.

"It wouldn't work, though..." Lupin admitted in defeat. "I've tried...before...only silver...and beheading...kills...werewolves..."

"I wouldn't want you to sacrifice yourself for me like that."

"Better me...than you..."

Harry said nothing.

"You... you were right..."

"Pardon?"

"About not telling... You were right."

"Glad you think so."

"Goodbye, Harry."

Harry looked over at the man who'd meant so much to him in the previous years. "Your fate is much worse than mine, Remus," he said quietly. "Goodbye."

They waited in silence. Lupin's face began to contort as waves of pre-transformation pain wracked his body.

The cell door opened once more. Dolohov stood there. "You have fifteen minutes until the moon rises," he informed them. "Say your last goodbyes." He glanced nervously at the werewolf before turning to leave.

Harry looked away, but suddenly there was an anguished cry. At first Harry thought that Lupin had uttered the cry, but a second look made him freeze in astonishment. Dolohov had fallen to the ground, his body a mass of open gashes. Blood was pouring out the wounds and pooling on the floor. Harry stared in amazement. He'd seen that curse in action once before...when he himself had used it on Draco Malfoy.

A moment later, Severus Snape had stepped over Dolohov's writhing body and into the room. He took one look at Lupin, and snapped, "Over here, Potter! Can't you see we're out of time?"

Too weak to walk, Harry crawled over to Lupin. Snape was examining the werewolf. "Less than ten minutes till he completes the transformation," Snape was muttering to himself. He looked up at Harry. "Here, Potter. Don't lose this again," he instructed, handing Harry his wand.

Harry took it, still gaping at Snape. "You came."

“So I did,” the man said coldly. “You’d better not get yourself in a situation where I have to come save your bloody hide again, because next time I might not be so generous.”

In spite of all that had happened, Harry smiled.

“Here. Grab this,” Snape said, holding out a fork he’d pulled from his robes.

Harry stared at it. “A fork?”

“Not a fork, a *Portkey*, Potter! Take it!”

Harry obeyed. Snape quickly wrapped Lupin’s hand around the other end of the fork, then touched the middle with his own fingers. “On the count of three. One, two...”

Harry never heard the three. The Portkey activated, and as they were whirled away from the cell, Harry’s mind was completely blank as he sank into the blackness that welcomed him.

Author’s Note: There. A good long chapter for you—the longest I’ve written so far, and I hope it answered some of your questions. More explanations in the next chapter, but this will have to do for a few days, as I don’t have the next chapter completed yet.

This isn't pertinent to the story, but the Death Eaters wouldn't have allowed Lupin to "eat" Harry. They were planning on pulling Harry out at the last moment (literally) and throwing him in a different cell, then waiting for the Dark Lord to come around and perform some Legilimency to extract the information. It's just lucky for Harry that Snape got there first. Next chapter...the promised Harry/Ginny fluff. Though not too much, I hope.

You know what I want now... :-)

Chapter 46

For those of you who thought that Snape left Lupin in the cell in the last chapter, I quote:

'Harry obeyed. *Snape quickly wrapped Lupin's hand around the other end of the fork*, then touched the middle with his own fingers. "On the count of three. One, two..."

And here's the chapter...

He was floating. Floating on a bed of pillows and blankets that were so soft that Harry wished he'd never have to leave the bed again. He was so warm, and comfortable, and clean...and a small, warm hand was brushing the hair from his face and dabbing a cool cloth on his forehead.

Hang on, this wasn't what the cell felt like...what was going on?

"How's he doing?" someone said over top of him. The man's voice sounded familiar.

A small girlish sigh. "Alright, I suppose... I mean, how good can you do after being put under the Cruciatus Curse no less than fifty times in a period of three weeks?"

I don't know whether you're talking about me or not, but if you are, I'm feeling great, Harry wanted to say. If only he could get his mouth to work. Right now, he couldn't even get his eyes to cooperate and open.

The man sucked in his breath. "*Fifty times?* Bloody hell."

"That's what Emmeline Vance said. Much more, and he'd have lost his mind."

"They were probably torturing him as much as they could without pushing him over the edge of insanity," the man said bitterly.

"That's what I think too. But he's here, now, and he's going to be alright."

Am I dead? Maybe I'm dead.

"How's Remus?" the girl asked.

"No better."

“Oh.”

“Emmeline says it will take longer for him to wake. I mean, going into a full moon when you’re half dead isn’t exactly good on a werewolf’s health.”

There was a pause.

“Were they really locked up in the same cell for the full moon?” the girl whispered.

“That’s what Severus said.”

“I can’t believe he saved them. He’s a Death Eater.”

“I suppose he had a change of heart. But I sense that there’s much more to that story than we’re being told.”

“You think he’s hiding something?”

“Yes. When I deserted Death Eater ranks, I was considered the first and last to change sides. The Death Eaters spread such horrible rumors of my painful extended death to insure that no one would ever desert again. Severus must have had a very good reason to switch sides, much better than the pathetic excuses he’s been feeding us. I think he’s waiting for Remus and Harry to wake.”

I’m awake! I’m right here! Why can’t I talk to you? Harry thought, exasperated. He focused on his eyes. *Fine. Maybe only one eye. Focus on the right eye. Open! Open!*

It took quite a while, but finally Harry succeeded in opening his right eye. He could only see the fuzzy outline of one of the speakers hovering above him, but he recognized the man immediately. It was Regulus Black.

OK, I’m definitely not dead. He’s not dead, so I must not be dead either. How am I still alive, though?

Neither Regulus nor the girl noticed that Harry’s right eyelid had just flickered.

"I wonder when they'll wake. It's been three days," the girl mused.

I've been asleep for three days? Merlin's Beard. How did I get here, anyway? And who's that girl?

"I'm sure it will be soon," Regulus said.

"I hope. Would you get me some more cool water?"

"Sure."

Regulus left the room.

Suddenly Harry was feeling very tired. All thoughts of waking up slipped from his mind. No. He could wake up later. Now was the time to sink back onto the gloriously soft pillows and loose himself in dreamland...he could solve the mystery of the girl's voice tomorrow...

Harry awoke to beams of light shining in his eyes. He tried to pull his covers over his head and catch a few more winks, but for some reason his arms weren't responding. Alarmed, Harry opened his eyes and squinted down at them. There they were, lying on the covers. But try as he might, he couldn't move them. *Forget about the arms. Let's try the mouth.*

His mouth opened and closed. He wondered if he could talk now. He'd had a very odd dream about two people hovering above him...he'd wanted to speak, but couldn't...

Let's make sure there's no one is in the room before I try to talk. Who knows what might come out?

Harry took a quick examination of the room. OK. No one on the right, no one as far as he could see on the left...

Suddenly he heard a soft snore, and he jerked his head around to see what had made the noise. *Ouch. Too fast. Must remember to move my head slowly.*

Then his eyes widened. He could barely make out the figure of a petite girl sleeping curled up in an overstuffed armchair sitting right next to his bed. Her dressing robe was pulled tight around her like a blanket and waves of red hair cascaded over face and hid some of her freckles.

He knew who she was, even without his glasses.

“Ginny!”

Actually, it came out more like, “Githney!”

Immediately, Ginny woke. “Wha...” Then she saw Harry looking at her.

“Harry!” she said, looking delighted. “You’re awake!”

He tried to nod and grin, but only one corner of his mouth would pull up, and his head absolutely refused to move up and down. “Yeah,” he managed. “Um, glasses?”

She jumped off of the armchair and reached for his glasses on the nightstand. A moment later, her face came into sharp focus. “How are you feeling?”

“OK.”

“Marvelous!” she gushed. “I’m so glad... You’ve been asleep for nearly a week, you know.”

“I haf?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Regulus will be so glad you’ve finally awake. I’ll go get you some food. You are hungry, right?”

“Yeah.”

“OK!” she said cheerfully. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Harry wanted to tell her that her last admonishment was completely useless, since he couldn’t even moves his arms, much less his legs, but he was having trouble getting simple words out at the moment

and thought such a large string of words verbalized might be a little too much for now.

Ginny. How could that be Ginny? Last he'd seen her, she'd been lying in the bed, hardly able to carry on a conversation. What had happened? How was it possible that now she was up and about, with plenty of energy from what Harry could see?

And where was he, anyway? This sunny room definitely wasn't Grimmauld Place. Harry turned his head to the right. Out the window, he could see a small lawn, lit by the morning sun, and beyond that, a forest of evergreen trees. *Yep, definitely not Grimmauld Place.*

In five minutes, she was back, holding a tray. Harry could see a bowl of oatmeal, a plate of fruit, and a glass of milk from where he was. She started to hand him the tray, then looked puzzled when he didn't accept it.

Harry looked helplessly at her. "I... Uh, I can't... move..."

Comprehension dawned on her face. "Oooooohhhh, you mean you can't move your arms, right?"

Harry jerked his head a little, hoping she'd interpret it as a "yes."

Ginny clicked her tongue. "I forgot. That's alright, I'll just feed you myself." And before Harry could protest, she'd plopped the tray of food onto his chest and slid onto the bed.

"Regulus warned me about this," she continued, arranging the items on the tray and tucking the napkin around his neck. Harry blushed in embarrassment, mortified that she was about to feed him—as if he was a baby! He tried to argue, but she was still talking. "I'm so stupid... Anyway, I'm really glad you're awake; I was so worried, but Regulus said it was normal and of course he'd be the one to know. He was so glad to hear you're up... He would have come upstairs to say hello, but he's a little preoccupied right now. Open up."

Harry's mouth opened automatically, and in went a spoonful of thick oatmeal. He chewed it slowly, savoring the taste of real food after the

pitiful excuses for calories the Death Eaters had fed him and Remus...

Oh Merlin.

Remus.

He swallowed, and tried to get a word in, but instantly Ginny dumped another spoonful in his mouth.

"Stop!" Harry finally grated out once he'd swallowed again. Ginny jerked back, her eyes wide, but Harry jumped in before she could start talking. "Where...Lupin...? Is he...OK?"

"Oh, Harry, he's fine," Ginny said, but her face had tensed up. "He's not awake yet, though, but Emmeline is sure he'll make a full recovery..."

"How..."

"You can ask questions later," Ginny told him firmly. "Now eat."

Harry obeyed, but his mind was spinning with questions. How had he and Remus survived? They'd been in the cell, waiting for the full moon, but he couldn't remember anything past that. How had they gotten here? And what were Ginny and Regulus doing here?

Finally, with only a few minor spills, Harry had eaten his full of breakfast. Swallowing all of his Gryffindor pride, he managed a small smile at Ginny and said, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," she said, grinning back. "Now go to sleep."

"Wait..." he croaked, and she looked at him, one eyebrow cocked.

"How... Why... My arms?" Harry managed to say.

Ginny's eyes darkened. "It was the Cruciatus Curse... Regulus said that overexposure will cause a temporary paralysis of your arms and legs. It's almost like a shock symptom. Don't worry, you'll be able to move again in a few days. The paralysis isn't permanent."

She threw him an appraising glance, then added mischievously, "Then I won't have to feed you anymore, thank Merlin!"

Harry laughed. Then, after a moment, Ginny joined him. "Try to get some rest," she said once she'd caught her breath again. "I'll run the tray downstairs, and you'd better be asleep by the time I'm back!"

Harry nodded. The pillow *did* feel inviting. Ginny reached over and gently removed his glasses.

He watched Ginny leave, and wondered again what had happened to her. It was almost...it was almost like seeing the old Ginny back again. But now that he thought about it, there was still a difference, still a change in the new Ginny that Azkaban had caused. Her eyes, though bright and cheery, had a darker, deeper level to them. He could see by looking at her that she'd seen horrible things in her life.

I'm glad she's out of Azkaban.

And with this more cheerful thought on his mind, he closed his eyes and slept.

When he woke again, the light in the room had changed. The shadows were longer, more distinct. Harry turned his head to look out the window; the sun was setting, red and orange through the dark shadows that had to be trees.

The room was empty. Harry felt better; maybe he could get out of bed. He looked down at his arms and willed them to move. To his surprise, he could wiggle his fingers, but he still couldn't get the larger muscles to work.

He sighed in exasperation. He needed answers right now; he needed his movement back too. Instead he was stuck in bed frozen by some weird aftereffect of the Cruciatus Curse that was affecting not only his arms and legs but his speech as well. Unless that had returned...

"My name is Harry Potter," Harry said on impulse, and was surprised to find that he could converse in complete sentences again. Unfortunately, the timing was bad.

“And I’m Ginny Weasley. It’s nice to meet you,” said Ginny as she slipped into the room, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth.

“Uh, sorry,” Harry apologized, turning bright red. “I was just, you know, seeing if I could talk again.”

“I think your speech abilities are functioning magnificently,” she replied dryly. “Can you move yet?”

“Alas, no,” Harry said sorrowfully, hanging his head.

“Then I suppose another Ginny-served meal is in order,” Ginny said, reaching for the nightstand and plopping his round glasses on his nose.

“Not so hard!” Harry complained playfully. “My nose is sensitive. Dolohov smashed his fist into it, after all.”

“I’m sure that hurt,” Ginny said, frowning. “Do you want a pain-killer potion?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m fine. I can’t feel anything right now.”

“Then I’ll go get you some food,” she decided.

“And when you get back, can I finally have some questions answered?”

She smiled faintly. “I’ll do my best.”

Ginny was only gone for ten minutes, but they were the longest ten minutes of Harry’s life. He had so many questions he wanted to ask her: Why hadn’t he been torn apart at the full moon? What had happened? How had he and Lupin escaped, anyway? Where was he? Why was she here? What had happened while he’d been imprisoned behind Death Eater walls? Had anyone else died? How were Sirius and Leila? Were they going mad with worry? What would they say when they discovered the truth—that Harry had to reverse the Aperio and Snape was the third?

Ginny finally reentered, carrying a tray heavy with food. She set the tray down on the nightstand and looked inquiringly at Harry. "Do you want your food first, or your answers?"

"Answers!" Harry said without hesitation. He was hungry, but not that hungry.

"OK," she replied, and once again plopped herself down on the edge of his mattress. "What do you want to know?"

"How did I get here?" Harry said quickly.

"You don't remember?"

"No."

"It was Severus," she said simply, and Harry almost choked at her casual use of Snape's first name.

Ginny cocked one eyebrow at him. "What?"

"I'm just not used to people addressing him by his first name," Harry explained. *Especially not you*, he added silently.

"Well, what was I supposed to call him?" she shot back. "Mr. Snape?"

Harry laughed. "You're right; that's much worse. So how did he get us back here?" *And why can't I remember it?*

"He says he talked Pettigrew into spilling. Pettigrew told him where your cell was," Ginny said solemnly. "He then found it and just happened to arrive as another Death Eater was inside. He killed the Death Eater and then got you two out with a Portkey."

Now it all came flooding back to him...the hours of awful waiting for the full moon, the threats of the Death Eaters, McNair's final visit, and then Snape rushing in. The last thing he remembered was reaching out and touching the silver fork Portkey...

"And Lupin?" Harry said wildly. "What happened to Lupin? Is he OK? Did he bite anyone?"

"No, Harry. Lupin's fine. He's still asleep, probably the aftereffects of torture and malnutrition on top of a transformation, but he should be awakening any hour now. Severus's Portkey brought him to this street, and he rushed Lupin in here. Lupin's got an iron cell in his basement and Snape put him in there and locked it up tight." Ginny shuddered a little. She must have been thinking about Lupin...his transformation, if not muted by Silencing Charms, would have been horrible to listen to...

"Where are we?"

"You don't know?" Ginny asked, cocking her head.

Harry sighed in exasperation. "Of *course* I don't know! I've never been here before!"

"Oh. This is Lupin's house."

Harry frowned. "How on earth did Snape get here? I'm the Secret-keeper!"

Ginny shrugged. "He said you told him. Did you tell him?"

Harry struggled to remember. Had he told Snape? Distant memories were flitting in and out of his mind...

Someone was slapping his cheeks and shaking him.

"Potter! Goddammit, Potter, wake up! Tell me where Lupin lives!"

Harry opened one bleary eye to see Snape hovering over him. "Twenty-three Townsend Road in Liverpool," he managed to say before sinking back into darkness.

"He must have known the general area and made the Portkey land in a street near Lupin's house," Ginny said thoughtfully. "Then you told him the exact location, and he found the house. It was scary...he came bursting through the door and Regulus almost killed him before Snape shouted that he'd just saved both of your lives. It took both him and Regulus to get Lupin downstairs and locked away...just seconds

before the transformation was complete.” She shuddered again. “They left you to me.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks,” Harry said awkwardly.

“No problem,” she said, grinning at him. “Any other questions?”

“Yeah...do you know how Sirius and Leila are doing?”

“Besides bombarding us with about twenty-nine owls a day asking how you are?” Ginny said, the corners of her mouth twitching. “I think they’re fine.”

Harry gave an audible sigh of relief. Leila was OK. Sirius was OK. But why weren’t they here?

He repeated the last question aloud.

“I’m not sure. McGonagall probably doesn’t want them to leave the school right now. Security is really tight, with the Death Eater attack and everything. You’ll see them as soon as you’re well enough to travel...” Ginny’s face clouded over, and Harry wondered why. But a second later her cheery smile was back. “Anything else?”

“Uh, yeah,” Harry said, wondering how to word the next question. In the end, he just blurted, “How come you’re so healthy? Last time I saw you, you, uh, didn’t look good.”

Ginny shook her head and clicked her tongue at him. “Tactful, you are not,” she said.

She must have watched Star Wars, Harry thought, grinning.

“If you really want to know, I just got up one day in November and felt as if I’d woken up from a long nightmare. I had energy again, and my magical reserves were rising. Soon Regulus got tired of me following him around all day long and pestering him for something to do, so he told me I could help with the cooking and cleaning. He even got me a wand and started teaching me some simple spells. And then one night Sirius came rushing into the house shouting that our location wasn’t safe and we had to leave. It was terrifying, knowing that the

Death Eaters could burst in any moment and take us... But Regulus was really calm and he just ran upstairs and collected the Horcruxes while I got my stuff. Then Sirius showed us the slip of paper you gave him, and we all Apparated over to this house. Well, OK, Sirius Side-Along-Apparated me. I'll be old enough to get my license next year, but of course that requires walking into the Ministry and I can't do that..." Ginny laughed, but Harry could hear a note of bitterness in her voice.

"Do you like this house?" Ginny continued lightly. "It's called Castaway Cabin, and it's so cozy; I really like it."

"Castaway Cabin?"

"Yeah. It's in the middle of a forest. I'm not sure how Lupin found a house in the middle of a wood in Liverpool, but hey, we're magical, right?"

There was a moment of silence in which Harry eyed the food. Finally Ginny sighed. "OK, OK. I get it. You want food."

"Please?"

"Fine. But I'm getting really tired of this 'feeding you' thing... I guess it sure beats giving you a bed bath, though."

Harry's face turned bright red as he struggled for something to say that wouldn't further the process of blood rushing to his head.

The food tasted wonderful. Ginny kept slipping in subtle hints that she wanted some answers from him, but Harry kept his mouth closed—figuratively, of course, since he was engaged in eating at the moment. When Ginny left, Harry knew she wasn't exactly happy about his refusal to tell her what she wanted to know.

He was still confused as to why Snape hadn't come upstairs to see him yet. The obvious answer was unfortunately the grimmest one as well: Lupin was in such critical condition that Snape's assistance was required continually. Harry knew that his former Potions professor

was skilled at healing people, besides the fact that potions—Snape's area of expertise—were essential to any Wizarding infirmary.

The next time he opened his eyes, there was light shining into the room, but it was pink and gold. Harry couldn't see the sun, but he figured it was sunrise. He automatically reached for his glasses, and to his utter amazement, his arm responded automatically, although it hurt like anything. Encouraged, Harry tried his other arm, with the same results.

"Yes!" he whispered fervently.

Harry's entire body felt like one big bruise. Even his bones ached. But the pain was bearable, especially since he had his mobility back. Slowly, Harry positioned his arms and pushed himself into a sitting position. *OK. So far so good.* But before he could slide his legs out of bed, the door flew open.

Ginny was there, looking as if she'd run all the way up the stairs. Her face was red, and she was breathing hard. She didn't even react to seeing him sitting up in bed. "Lupin's awake... Oh, Harry, it was so awful! He started yelling and fighting us... He thought he'd killed you. He thought we were Death Eaters... Then Severus started shouting that you were OK and you were both safe at his house. He was saying that you three would have to leave immediately, and that Lupin needed to get his head straightened out because the Death Eaters were looking for him and it wasn't even safe here at the cabin, or at Hogwarts, or anywhere. Severus said something about going away, far away, where You-Know-Who can't reach you while you're trying to solve some spell mystery... I'm scared! Where are you going? Why are you leaving? You can't leave... What if the Death Eaters catch you? But why are they looking for you in the first place? What's going on?"

She looked so scared standing there in the door, her face white and her eyes wide. "You can't leave," Ginny said again in a small voice.

Harry forgot about rushing down the stairs to see Lupin. Suddenly the only person that mattered in the entire world was the red-haired girl standing in front of him.

“We have to leave,” he said quietly.

“But why? Harry, please tell me.”

Harry took a deep breath, suddenly glad that Lupin had explained all this to him when he’d become Lupin’s Secret-keeper. “It won’t be safe for you here if we stay. Have you ever wondered why Sirius wasn’t his own Secret-keeper for Grimmauld Place? Or why my dad didn’t become the Secret-keeper for our house at Godric’s Hollow?”

She shook her head and waited for him to continue.

“It’s because when the Secret-keeper stays inside the house that’s under the Fidelius Charm, the magic will slowly deteriorate,” Harry explained with a sigh. “That means the spell will wear off and you won’t be safe any more. I’ve been here too long...a little more than a week, right?”

Ginny nodded, her eyes still wide as saucers.

“So the protection is at this very moment breaking. In another few days—or it could be hours, since no one knows how long the deterioration will take—this house will be exposed to Death Eaters and you’ll both be in grave danger.”

Harry once again made a move to get out of bed, but Ginny suddenly spoke again, her voice barely a whisper. “Where will you go?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea. It sounds like Snape wants us to get out of the country.” As he spoke the words, a sharp pain that was completely unrelated to the Cruciatus Curse stabbed his chest. Leaving the country would mean saying good-bye to Sirius and Leila...forever. He wasn’t sure if he could deal with that just yet... But one thing he did know: It was imperative for him to leave as soon as possible.

“Why do the Death Eaters want you?”

Harry looked up. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Harry, please...” Ginny pleaded. “You promised me...”

And then Harry remembered that he *had* promised her. On the night of the first Order meeting after school had started, he's promised Ginny that one day he'd tell her the truth. Harry felt torn...he struggled for a minute, trying to decide. If he told her, what would she say? The truth about why he'd rescued her from Azkaban would come out. What would she think of him? On the other hand, she'd probably find out eventually anyway. Once the Aperio was reversed, someone would figure out the truth... And he'd made a promise. He remembered Sirius's words on the night he'd revealed his plans to get Ginny out of Azkaban... *"Besides, I promised I'd keep this between us, and this Black never goes back on his word."*

This Potter doesn't either. "OK," Harry finally said. "I'll tell you. I did promise, after all. You'll think I'm crazy, but it's the truth."

Ginny smiled weakly at him. "You'll tell me?"

"Yes. But you'd better sit down."

Author's Note: Another really long chapter for you. They won't all be this long.

Come on, guys, I only got 36 reviews on the last chapter. I know more of you are reading than that... I mean, I've got 407 people receiving alerts when I update. So I beg you, REVIEW! Only 113 more reviews before we reach 1000.

Next chapter, another Harry/Ginny scene. And we might meet Leila and Sirius again...

Chapter 47

"You'd better sit down."

Ginny moved toward the bed and slid onto the mattress. Harry moved his legs aside to make room for her, relishing the feeling of blood flowing to his lower extremities once again. His pulse quickened as his mind shouted out reasons why he shouldn't tell her.

"Ginny..." *She'll never believe you. She'll think you're crazy.* "Ginny, I..." *You'll endanger her. What if the Death Eaters find her and torture the information out of her?* "I...uh..."

"Harry."

Harry jerked his head up and met her eyes.

"Just start at the beginning," she said softly.

And so he did. He started at the very beginning: The prophecy. In reality, everything came down to that, anyway. Ginny said nothing as he told her of the prophecy that Sybill Trelawney had made, Voldemort's plans to attack his parents' house, and the rebounding curse triggered by his mother's sacrifice.

"But I don't understand," she said when he took a breath, confusion etched across her face. "Your parents died a month ago. How..."

"I grew up with the Dursleys," Harry said, interrupting her. She had to understand the history first, and then he could tell her about the Aperio. "My mum's sister and her husband. They hated me. They're Muggles."

"When I was eleven, Hagrid brought me my Hogwarts letter and told me what had really happened to my parents. I found out that I was really a Wizard, and a famous one at that. I finally found out why I had the lightning-shaped scar on my forehead."

"But I don't see a scar..."

"I met Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley and we became good friends. We've been best mates ever since our first year."

"Ron? My brother?"

"Yes. During my years at Hogwarts, Voldemort tried to attack me multiple times. In my fourth year, he used my blood to resurrect himself. The reason he didn't die when the killing curse rebounded was the Horcruxes he'd made, but we didn't know that then.

"In my fifth year, he tried repeatedly to get the prophecy which was kept in the Ministry of Magic. He lured me to the Ministry by using the connection we had to make me believe he had Sirius and was torturing him. I fell for the deception. Ron and Hermione along with three other friends went with me. We duelled the Death Eaters, and the Order showed up just in time to save our lives. But Bellatrix Lestrange murdered Sirius."

Ginny gave a tiny gasp, but this time she didn't try to interrupt.

"Sixth year: Dumbledore figured out why Voldemort was seemingly immortal. He told me about the Horcruxes, and I in turn, told Hermione and Ron. They were my closest friends, even more so after Sirius's death. Dumbledore destroyed several Horcruxes. Near the end of the school year, he took me along to destroy another one he'd found. It was the locket in the cave, but it was fake, with the note inside signed with Regulus's initials. Dumbledore was weakened. When we returned to the school, there was a Dark Mark over the Astronomy Tower. We flew there, but it was a trap. I was under the Invisibility Cloak, and he Petrificus Totalised me. All I could do was watch as Death Eaters appeared at the top of the tower, led by Draco Malfoy."

"Malfoy?"

"He was a Death Eater," Harry said flatly. "He had the mark, and he was supposed to kill Dumbledore. But he couldn't, and then Snape appeared. He killed Dumbledore and ran."

"No." Ginny looked stricken. "Severus wouldn't do that...he wouldn't..."

“He did. But I found out later that Dumbledore would have died anyway and he planned his death. You see, Snape was the Order’s spy for the Death Eaters. It’s too hard to explain everything now... But by killing Dumbledore, he proved his loyalty to the Dark Lord and could thus help us even more.”

“I still don’t understand...”

“It all started on the night after Dumbledore’s funeral,” Harry said, pressing on. “I was back at the Dursleys one more time, but as soon as we could, Ron, Hermione, and I were going to sneak away and go hunt for the Horcruxes.”

“By yourself?”

“Dumbledore had warned us not to tell anyone else. I was thinking about him before I went to sleep, but then my thoughts turned to Sirius and my parents. Mostly my parents. I wished they were alive.

“When I woke up the next morning, everything had changed. My parents were alive, Sirius was alive, I had a sister, Dumbledore died years ago, Tonks and Charlie and Hagrid were dead, the Longbottoms were alive, Snape had never come over to our side, the Order had disbanded, Ron hated me, you were in Azkaban...” He really hadn’t meant to say that. He was trying to keep that topic out of the conversation for now. Harry knew that Ginny had picked up on it, though. He could almost see her mind working, processing the information, wondering why she hadn’t been sent to Azkaban in the other world.

“Go on.”

“I thought I was going crazy,” Harry continued. “But then a few days later, Lupin showed up and I found out that I wasn’t the only one who remembered the old reality. Lupin had done his homework. He told me of an unusual piece of Old Magic called an Aperio.”

“An Aperio,” Ginny echoed softly.

“When three people want something really badly, and they wish for it at the exact same time, the magic creates a parallel reality in which

their wish comes true and then pulls the three individuals into it,” Harry explained.

Comprehension flooded her eyes. “Severus was the third.”

Harry nodded. “But we didn’t know that. Anyway, I told Lupin about the Horcruxes, and we re-formed the Order.”

Ginny let out a long breath. “That’s why Lupin seemed to know so much. Lupin kept claiming he was getting his information from a Death Eater, but Regulus was suspicious.”

Harry was surprised she knew so much about the inner circle secrets of the Order. But then again, Sirius and Regulus probably didn’t see any problems in telling Ginny. It wasn’t as if she could leave the house, and she didn’t have anyone to betray them to.

“But there’s one thing I don’t understand,” Ginny continued, pursing her lips. Harry braced himself for the Azkaban question, but instead, she said, “How did Lupin know that Pettigrew was the traitor?”

After a short explanation about the Potters’ Secret-keeper in the other reality and the reason for Sirius’s twelve year incarceration in Azkaban, Harry launched into the story of his third year at Hogwarts.

“That slimy little rodent,” Ginny raged once he was done. “He deserves to die... No, he deserves a fate worse than death!”

Harry shrugged. “I hate him too, but he did save Lupin and I by telling Snape where we were.”

She scowled. “Probably only because Severus was waving a wand in his face and threatening the slimy coward with a few of his own personal hexes and jinxes.”

They fell silent. Then Ginny spoke again, her voice tentative. “Harry... You’ve told me what happened to Ron, Lupin, Severus, Sirius, and the Order...but what happened to the rest of my family in your world?”

Harry took a breath. "Your family was happy," he said softly. "Your mum and dad were the best people on earth. They were like second parents to me. Bill and Fleur were to get married the summer after my sixth year. Charlie, of course, was working in Romania, and Percy...well, he kinda disowned the family after Voldemort's return, but he'll come around, I'm sure. Fred and George used my Triwizard Tournament winnings to start their own joke shop in Diagon Alley. It was really successful."

"Oh." Ginny swallowed, then looked Harry straight in the eye. "And what about me?" she whispered.

Harry gulped. *Tell her the truth...just spit it out...* "You...you didn't go to Azkaban."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why not? Did the diary just not exist or something?"

"No, it existed, unfortunately. Lucius put Riddle's diary in your cauldron at Flourish and Blott's and you wrote in it all year long."

"Who died?" Ginny said, sighing and closing her eyes.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"I said, who died? In your world, I mean."

"No one died, Ginny."

Her eyes flew open. "Why? What happened? Did someone catch me before the Basilisk was released?"

"No."

"Then what happened? Tell me what happened!" she cried wildly.

"The students were Petrified, not killed, because no one actually looked directly into the snake's eyes."

"And why didn't I end up at Azkaban?"

“It was Hermione...she figured it out,” Harry said quickly. “Hermione figured out the mystery. She was on her way to tell us—me and Ron, that is—when she met the Basilisk and was Petrified. Then...uh, then you were taken into the Chamber and Ron and I went to go rescue you.”

Ginny’s face was pale again. “Oh, Merlin. You didn’t.”

“We did,” Harry sighed. “We...OK, I...got into the Chamber and killed Riddle and the Basilisk and managed to destroy the diary. With the help of the Sorting Hat and Fawkes, of course, but that’s going too much into detail...”

Ginny was silent for a moment. “So you saved my life.”

“I guess so.”

“And then you saved it again.”

Harry swallowed. “Yeah.”

“You felt guilty.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement. For a moment, Harry considered denying it, but he knew Ginny would see through his lies. “Yes,” he finally said, hanging his head.

Ginny sighed. “I knew there had to be a reason why you rescued me. So you got me out of Azkaban because you felt guilty. You felt like it was your fault I was there because of the Aperio thing.”

Harry said nothing.

Suddenly a strange glint came into Ginny’s eyes. “And what happened to me after the Chamber of Secrets?” she inquired.

“You recovered, and lived a good life. You were happy,” Harry said, deciding not to tell her about her crush on him... He had to remind himself that he was talking about a person that was still alive. Somewhere, in the other world, Ginny was still living, probably in her seventh year at Hogwarts, probably wondering where he’d gone.

“And what about us?” Ginny pressed. “Was there ever anything between us?”

Harry froze. The very question he’d wanted to avoid. But there was no turning back now...

“Yes,” he admitted, not meeting her eyes.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Ginny reached over and pulled his chin up. When Harry met her eyes, he was surprised to see a look of satisfaction there.

“Good,” Ginny said, smirking at him. “I was starting to wonder whether you were avoiding me because you just didn’t like being around me, or if it was because you liked me. Now I know.”

Harry gulped. She’d noticed? Ever since their conversation back in October, Harry *had* been avoiding her. He’d had multiple opportunities to talk to her at the Order meetings that were now held primarily at Grimmauld Place, but when Sirius or Regulus had reminded him that he could see Ginny, he’d made excuses. He liked Ginny—a lot—but he hadn’t wanted to rush things. And he’d been afraid...afraid that she’d discover the truth, afraid of her reaction if she discovered his feelings for her, afraid she’d reject him...

“Ginny...”

“It’s OK,” she said softly. “I feel the same way about you.”

Harry gaped at her. Then she did something unexpected. She leaned over and kissed him.

Harry was so shocked he could hardly move. Ginny’s lips were so soft, so gentle, so sweet... And suddenly Harry was kissing her back, pulling her closer, running his fingers through her hair, tilting his head to give him better access. She opened her mouth to him, and Harry felt lightheaded... He was drowning in her. It was a good thing he was sitting, because he was positive his knees wouldn’t support his weight right now.

Stop! Stop it right now! You're making a mistake! a voice in his head screamed.

Harry knew he should end it, knew he should pull away, but he wasn't thinking rationally. Ginny's hands were buried in his hair, pulling him still closer as she deepened the kiss.

This isn't right.

With all the self-control he possessed, Harry gently pushed Ginny away. She was panting slightly.

"Ginny... I can't..."

"Why not?" she said in a low voice.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, then looked her straight in the eyes. "I won't be here for long. It's not fair to you. I'll be gone soon...gone back to the other reality... I can't take advantage of you like this..."

Ginny smiled sadly at him. "I don't really care," she whispered.

"But I do," Harry said. "You know we can't be together... When I leave here, I'll probably never see you again."

Ginny said nothing for a long moment. Then she reached over and took his hand. "Then let's just call that a thank you kiss," she said, squeezing his hand. "Thank you for saving me...once in the Chamber of Secrets, and then in Azkaban."

"No problem," Harry said, feeling his face redden.

"You'll forgive me for throwing myself at you like that?" Ginny asked. "I really should have asked first... Teenage hormones, and all," she explained, looking embarrassed.

"You're forgiven," Harry said.

"We should probably go," Ginny told him, glancing up at the clock on the wall. "Lupin's awake, after all, and I bet he wants to see you."

Harry found that getting his legs to work was harder than it seemed. He had to constantly concentrate to avoid falling... Even so, he slipped several times on the stairs, and would have fallen if Ginny hadn't been there to support him. She was surprisingly strong for her small frame. Of course, it helped that Harry had lost quite a lot of weight while imprisoned by the Death Eaters.

At the bottom of the stairs was a long hallway. Harry could hear voices coming from an open doorway near the end, and as they approached, the voices got louder.

Harry stopped in the doorway and leaned heavily against the frame. Regulus and Snape were hovering over a bed. Lupin was lying there, looking pale and drawn. All three were engaged in a heated discussion. They didn't notice Harry and Ginny.

"You can't just leave!" Regulus said angrily. "It's not safe out there... You're safer here!"

"But you don't understand, Regulus," Lupin said weakly. "You and Ginny aren't safe as long as Harry is here...the Death Eaters could come any hour..."

"I still say you're in no condition to travel, Remus!" Regulus argued. "A Portkey trip could do much harm..."

"I agree." Snape's cold voice filled the room. "You are in no condition to travel. But unfortunately, it is the only solution we have. We aren't safe here, but neither are we safe at Hogwarts. The wards have been breeched once, they can fail again. We could find a place and put it under the Fidelius Charm, but the Secret-keeper would be in much danger. The Death Eaters are looking for us night and day, and the Dark Lord does not give up easily."

"And an illegal Portkey is even safer?" Regulus scoffed. "The Ministry could track you in a second. And we all know that the Ministry is completely under Voldemort's control."

Snape glared at Regulus. "Who said this Portkey was illegal?"

There was a moment of incredulous silence. "Severus...where in nine galaxies did you get a legal Portkey?" Lupin said weakly.

"From an authorized Portkey creator," Snape said dryly. "Minerva McGonagall."

Another long silence. Then Regulus exploded. "You went to *McGonagall*? Are you *mad*?"

"It was my only option!" Snape spat. "Did you want me to leave Potter and Lupin there to die? I couldn't create a Portkey myself, and that was the only way I knew how to get them out alive! I remembered that Potter telling me that the only other people who knew besides his sister were Minerva and Alastor. I couldn't exactly approach Alastor, though; he'd send me to Azkaban as soon as look at me. Minerva, though, was a different story. I caught her alone one afternoon and told her I was the third in the Aperio. She believed me, and gave me the Portkey once she heard my plan to rescue Potter and Lupin. We both forgot that the Fidelius Charm would deteriorate with Potter underneath this roof, though."

"So your Portkey will take us to Hogwarts?" Lupin asked.

"Yes. Minerva has an International Portkey waiting. The only place we'll be safe from the Dark Lord's followers is in another country, a country where his power is diminished."

"Then we must leave immediately," Lupin sighed. "Help me up."

"No! You're not well, Remus!" Regulus argued.

"I am more concerned for your safety than my health," Lupin said firmly. "We need to leave now."

"Where is Potter, anyway?" Snape growled.

"I'm here," Harry called, stepping forward. Ginny was still hovering at his elbow.

"About time," Snape said, scowling. "Took you long enough."

"It's good to see you, too," Harry muttered, quickly closing the distance between the door and the bed. His legs seemed to be working better now, but just in case, he steadied himself against the bedpost.

"Help me up," Lupin said again. This time, Regulus obeyed, though he didn't look happy about it. With the combined effort of Regulus and Snape, Lupin was finally standing next to the bed.

"Thank you for all that you've done," Lupin said softly, looking at Regulus.

"You would have done the same for me," Regulus said gruffly.

"Goodbye, Harry," Ginny said, and Harry turned. She was at his side again, looking sadly up at him.

"Goodbye, Ginny," Harry said, looking back at her. Impulsively, he reached forward and hugged her. She returned the embrace.

"Have a good life," Ginny whispered in his ear. "And tell the other me that she's one fortunate girl to have you."

"Will do. And Ginny, you'll find someone. I promise. When you do, tell him he's the luckiest bloke on the planet."

Ginny pulled away and smiled at him, but her eyes were wet with tears. Suddenly she pulled his head down and kissed his cheek, then turned and fled the room.

Harry turned back to the three men, who had watched their exchange. Harry cleared his throat pointedly.

"Um, right," said Lupin. "You have the Portkey, Severus?"

"Here." Snape held out an old book. Lupin and Harry grasped it. "Activate," Snape commanded, and the Portkey glowed blue. Castaway Cabin disappeared in a whirl of swirling colors and the three were speeding away to Hogwarts.

Author's Note: WOW! Fifty-three reviews! Now, can I ask you guys to do it again? Pleeaaaaaase? We're sooooo close to 1000...

One of my reviewers commented that it isn't becoming for an author to beg. I totally agree! But that doesn't change the fact that almost every author out there begs for reviews at one point or another. So authors begging for reviews never bother me, because I know how they feel.

What DOES bother me is when an author says, "I'm not going to update until I get [insert large number here reviews]" My gosh, these people suck. I don't do that. That's purely manipulation. Reviews or no reviews, I will continue to update as the chapters are rolled out.

I hope that chapter answered a few questions. I was surprised at how easy it was to write. A little more fluff in that chapter... I really wanted a kiss, so there you have it. Oh, by the way, the current plan is sixty chapters. I'm sorry for not putting Leila and Sirius into that one, but I PROMISE they'll be in the next chapter, as well as Ron, Neville, and Jeremy, and *possibly* some characters we haven't seen yet... hint hint... Any guesses as to where he, Lupin, and Snape are going to go? Kudos to the person who guesses right!

Chapter 48

The world was a blur of colors as the Portkey whisked the three members of the Aperio away from Castaway Cabin. Harry watched the surroundings spin by, and then suddenly they reached their destination with a jolt that nearly made Harry's knees buckle. He swayed, concentrating on steadying himself as the room slowly came into focus.

Harry got a glimpse of McGonagall's office before someone crashed into him. Someone who was hugging him so hard he could hardly breathe. Someone who had long, dark brown hair.

"Oh, Harry, you're alright! I was so worried," Leila exclaimed, her voice muffled against his chest.

Harry hugged her back. It was several moments before she pulled away. "I thought I'd never see you again," she continued, smiling through her tears.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Lupin's the one you should be worried about."

Leila turned to look at Lupin, and Harry followed her gaze. Snape was helping Lupin into a chair. The werewolf looked pale and drawn, but he managed a reassuring look in Harry's direction.

Harry turned again, and then he noticed the other people in the room. McGonagall stood by the desk, and Sirius was next to her. The latter was alternating between shooting glares at Snape and smiling sadly at Harry.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Are you ready to go?"

Harry glanced over at Snape and Lupin. "Uh, where exactly are we going?" he asked the Headmistress.

"Somewhere safe," she hedged. "Look, I would tell you, but I don't want the information to be widely known. Hogwarts is not as safe as it used to be—the successful Death Eater attack proved that. I wouldn't

want to endanger anyone”—here she glanced significantly at Leila and Sirius—“with the information. The Death Eaters will go to any means to find you.

“But I assure you that the place you’ll be going is safe,” McGonagall continued. “And there are...certain people...there who will aid you as you reverse the Aperio.”

Harry suddenly realized that Sirius hadn’t moved. He hadn’t even looked surprised when McGonagall had mentioned the Aperio. That could only mean one thing.

“Does he...did you...” Harry sputtered.

McGonagall nodded.

“She told me, Harry,” Sirius said slowly.

“Everything?” Harry whispered.

“Everything.”

Harry couldn’t look at Sirius. He stared at the floor, ashamed, wishing it was all just a bad dream.

In two steps, Sirius crossed the room and grabbed Harry’s shoulders, forcing him to look up. “Harry, listen to me. I’m not mad at you. I wish you’d felt you could trust me enough to tell me...”

“Sirius...”

“No, really, Harry, it’s alright,” Sirius said. He swallowed hard. “Minerva told me about the Aperio and the other reality.”

“Everything?” Harry said again, his head spinning.

“Everything,” Sirius said firmly. “Like the fact that Lily and James and I were dead and *why* we were dead, the prophecy Trelawney made, and even the true reason you felt the need to dash into Azkaban and save your damsel in distress.”

Harry smiled faintly, feeling a little better. "And you're sure you're not mad?"

Sirius scowled. "Of course I'm mad, dammit! I'm going to murder Pettigrew, and Bellatrix, and Lucius Malfoy, and....oh, bloody hell, I'm going to kill every one of those Death Eaters who tortured you and Remus..."

Harry grinned. "I get the point. You're mad. But you're not mad at me?"

"No." Sirius looked him over sadly. "I understand why you didn't tell your parents or me... When Minerva first told me I thought she was delusional and had officially been Headmistress one to many years for her own good."

"Why, thank you, Sirius," McGonagall said dryly.

"And I understand that you have to go back," Sirius continued, ignoring McGonagall. "You've got people counting on you in the other world, Harry. You can't let them down."

Harry looked down again and kicked the carpet. "You don't know what it's like, living without you and Mum and Dad..."

Sirius shook him a little. "We all have to make sacrifices," he said gruffly. "You're doing the right thing."

"I know."

"And I'll miss you."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears that were threatening to come away. "I'll miss you too."

Sirius pulled him into a tight embrace. "Make your father and me proud," he murmured. "I want you to go back and kick some Voldemort arse, OK?"

Harry grinned. "I'll do my best. And if I can, I'll give Bellatrix what she deserves before I'm done."

“Atta boy.”

“But what will happen to you?” Harry said, pulling away and voicing the question he’d been wondering about for ages. “And the Order, and Hogwarts, and Leila, and Regulus, and Ginny...”

“Hogwarts will remain open,” McGonagall said, stepping forward and answering instead of Sirius. “Moody and I have been working on a new ward system that will likely make Hogwarts one of the safest places in Britain. With the aid of your godfather, of course, who claims he knows every secret passage in and out of the castle. Though how he discovered all of them, I’d like to know...” She frowned, and Sirius ducked his head, grinning guiltily.

“Leila will be at Hogwarts,” the Headmistress continued. “She can live with Sirius, as he is her godfather.”

Sirius nodded at Harry. “I’ll take care of her,” he said gravely.

“The Order has disbanded,” McGonagall told Harry, suddenly looking very old. “Most of them are going into hiding or fleeing the country. The Weasleys have opted for the latter. In six months Ronald Weasley will graduate, and then the entire family will be moving to America. I believe Arthur has family in Massachusetts. Anyway, Ginny will go with them, and in America she will be able to live a normal life without fear of being thrown back in Azkaban.”

Harry nodded. It was for the best. The family would be reunited again... If only Bill and Charlie hadn’t died...

“Sirius and Regulus have offered to stay here and continue covert operations against the Death Eaters,” McGonagall said, glancing in Sirius’s direction.

“By themselves?” Harry said incredulously.

“No, there are a few Order members left who have nothing left to loose. They are...they have...”

“Basically decided that we’re going to fight to the death,” Sirius said. “And hopefully take as many Death Eaters with us as possible when we go.”

Harry gaped at him. “That’s suicidal.”

Sirius nodded. “We know. But there’s nothing left to do. At first, of course, we’ll be helping the remaining families on our side flee the country.”

“Are you ready to go?” McGonagall asked, looking at her pocket watch. “This Portkey will only work for another hour.” She held up a dustpan.

“I’m still waiting for my luggage,” Lupin said from the chair. “Regulus said he’d Floo it over—didn’t want to trust any of us to hang onto the suitcase during the Portkey ride—but it’s not here yet.”

McGonagall frowned. “Severus, can you Floo Regulus and see what’s taking him so long?”

Snape inclined his head and headed for the fire, pointedly avoiding Sirius.

Harry turned to his godfather. “Can I get some of my stuff from the dormitory? Please? Just in case it takes a while for us to figure out how to reverse the *Aperio*?”

Sirius frowned. “I don’t know, Harry, you can’t be seen...”

Suddenly Leila spoke. “Here,” she said, reaching in her pocket and handing Harry something silvery. He stared at it for a moment before realizing what it was.

“It’s the Invisibility Cloak!”

“It’s yours,” she said, looking at him with an unreadable expression. “If you’d had it, maybe you wouldn’t have gotten captured.”

Harry sighed. “Leila, don’t be a prat. I *Imperioed* you, remember? My getting captured was my bloody fault, not yours.”

She nodded. "Use the cloak to get to the Gryffindor Tower."

Without waiting for permission from the Headmistress, Harry slipped the cloak on and headed for the door. He rode the moving staircase down and sprinted through the seventh floor halls. The corridors were surprisingly empty. New security measures must have been enforced.

When Harry reached the Portrait Hole, he groaned. He'd forgotten about the password... But then he heard footsteps behind him and turned just in time to leap out of the way of a frantic looking third year. "Lamb's broth," she practically yelled at the Fat Lady who swung open, muttering something about teenagers these days. The girl didn't bother to shut the portrait behind her and Harry had no problem slipping inside.

The common room was almost deserted, so Harry had no trouble avoiding the students. He finally reached the stairway and ascended it. When he reached the seventh years' dorm, he burst through the door...

And skidded to a halt. He'd forgotten to make sure the room was empty first...

Ron, Jeremy, and Neville were gaping at the door that had seemingly opened of its own accord. Jeremy stood up cautiously, and Harry felt his heart sink. Jeremy would know it was him...Jeremy knew about the cloak...Ron and Neville didn't.

"Harry?"

Harry backed away from the door, but suddenly his friend drew his wand. "Accio Invisibility Cloak!"

The cloak flew off and Harry bit back a curse. The room erupted in yells.

"Harry!"

"You're alright!"

"Mate, we were so worried..."

“Yeah, Harry, where were you, anyway?”

Jeremy and Ron were pounding Harry’s back, drawing him into the room, slamming the door behind them. Neville quickly locked it. Harry’s dormmates pushed him onto his old bed.

“It’s good to see you all,” Harry said awkwardly.

“You too, mate!” the three chorused.

“Where were you?” Ron inquired.

Harry shifted awkwardly. “I can’t say. But listen... you’re my friends... you deserve to know the truth.”

They waited.

“I’m leaving,” Harry told them in a low voice. “I’m leaving today. Right now. I’m not coming back.”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“But...you can’t leave. Where are you going?” Neville said in a small voice.

“I don’t know. But I have to leave.”

“Why? Tell us!” Jeremy demanded. “You know we won’t tell anyone else,” he assured Harry, and the other two nodded their heads emphatically.

“I would if I could,” Harry hedged. “I can’t, though. The Portkey’s going to activate soon. I just came back to get some stuff...”

“Does this have anything to do with my sister?” Ron said, staring determinedly at Harry.. “Did the Death Eaters find out that you were the one who got her out of Azkaban?”

Jeremy’s jaw dropped. Neville gave a squeak and promptly fell off the bed.

“Bloody hell!” Jeremy almost yelled. “That was *you*? You helped her escape?”

Harry nodded, bracing himself for a tirade. But it never came.

“That’s so freakin’ cool!”

Neville was nodding enthusiastically. “How’d you do it, Harry?” he asked.

Harry’s face reddened, but he gave them a quick explanation. When he’d finished, Jeremy turned to Ron.

“That wasn’t very decent of you,” he said angrily, “pranking Harry like that after he got your sister out of Azkaban.”

Ron looked uncomfortable, but Harry jumped in. “He was supposed to act like himself, Jer. If he’d suddenly started being nice, someone would have suspected something. If that someone was a Death Eater, the single clue could have led them to the evidence that I was the guilty party.”

Ron shot Harry a grateful look, and Jeremy looked appeased. “Besides,” Harry continued. “You have to give him credit—he hasn’t been as much of a prat as he was last year.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that you two were the prats, not me!” Ron protested, but he grinned as well. “You still haven’t answered my question, Harry.”

Harry looked at his best friends—the one from the other world and the one from this world—and Neville, who he’d become close to as well. *They deserve to know the real truth. You’ve been lying to them for six months—they deserve to know...*

He took a deep breath, and began to explain. He told them the same thing he’d told Ginny only an hour either. Neville, Ron, and Jeremy listened, spellbound as the masks Harry had been hiding behind all year long slowly fell away. Harry watched a collage of emotions crossed their faces: First shock as Harry told them about the Aperio and how his parents and Sirius had been dead in the other world,

anger as they realized he'd been lying to them for months, horror as he recounted his days in captivity, and finally sadness as he told them why he had to leave.

Once he'd finished, Jeremy was the first one to speak. "Another world, huh? So, were we best friends in the other reality too? Were you a Seeker? Is that why you changed positions this year? Is that why you know all those cool spells and you're the class brain all of a sudden?"

"No, yes, yes, and yes," Harry replied.

"No to which one?"

"To the question about us being best friends."

"Oh. So were we enemies?"

"No. Actually, I didn't know you at all. You never moved to Britain."

Jeremy looked disappointed. "So who *were* your friends?"

Harry inwardly groaned. "Ron and Hermione Granger."

Ron snorted, and Neville laughed. "You and *Ron*?" Jeremy said incredulously. "No way."

"Who's Hermione Granger?" Ron asked.

"She's a Muggleborn witch. We met each other on the train in our first year."

"Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, best friends," Jeremy said, grinning. "Has a nice ring to it."

Ron promptly hit him.

"Listen, I'd love to stay and talk, but I really have to be going," Harry said, standing again and throwing open his trunk.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked, sobering. "Will you ever come back?"

Harry sighed. "I told you. I don't know where we're going to go, but I have to go with Snape and Lupin and we have to reverse the Aperio. Were you listening to anything I said?"

"I was listening," Neville reassured him. "You've got to go back to the other world and defeat You-Know-Who."

"That's basically it," Harry said, scowling as he tried to find his extra set of everyday robes. He was of age now—in any dignified Wizarding circles, he'd be expected to dress in Wizarding garb.

Ron and Jeremy were silent. "Are you really going to kill him?" Ron asked in a small voice.

"I've got to. The prophecy said that neither can live while the other survives." Harry threw the last of his stuff including the Marauder's Map and Lupin's magical mirror in a small traveling bag. "You guys can have my trunk. If you don't want it, just throw it out. And give my Quidditch robes to one of the players."

Suddenly Harry felt his hand close over two cool objects. He pulled them close and found himself staring at his Prefect and Quidditch Captain badges. Knowing he wouldn't need them anymore, he quickly made a decision.

Harry stood and looked over at his friends. "I've got something for each of you before I go," he said, and they waited, looking curious.

With a quick motion, Harry tossed the Captain badge to Jeremy and the Prefect badge to Ron.

Jeremy held the badge up to the light, and started whooping. A silly grin spread over Ron's face as he held the Prefect badge tenderly in his palm. "Gee, thanks Harry!"

Harry took a deep breath and turned to Neville. "Nev, I never got to tell you how sorry I was about your parents."

Neville's face darkened with pain, but he nodded. "T-thanks, Harry. I'm sorry about your parents too."

Harry sighed. "But for you it was worse... I'd already lost my parents once; you hadn't. I have something to tell you, though. When I told you about the Aperio, did you wonder what happened to you and your family in the other reality?"

Neville nodded slowly.

"You were raised by your grandmother, but not because your parents were dead. They were unable to take care of you because..." Harry gulped, struggling to get the next words out. "...because they were locked up in the incurable mind damage ward of St. Mungo's."

Neville blanched. "Why?"

"Prolonged Cruciatus Curse," Harry said, looking out the window. "Bellatrix Lestrange did it, when you were just a baby."

There was a long silence. Then Neville said, "Thanks, Harry."

"Thanks?" Ron interrupted. "He just told you your parents were mental—literally—in the other world!"

"No, he didn't," Neville said suddenly, looking up. "He just made me realize how grateful I should be that Mum and Dad didn't suffer." He swallowed hard. "It's better to know that they went quickly, then to know that they were in lots of pain before they died. I'm much luckier than the other me. I knew Mum and Dad for seventeen years. I've got loads to be grateful for."

Ron looked ashamed. "Sorry," he muttered.

Harry stood. "I've got to go," he said. He'd been dreading this moment—the moment he'd have to say goodbye. But McGonagall was probably pulling her hair out by now, wondering what was taking him so long.

Jeremy stood too. "Bye, Harry," he said, his voice suddenly husky. He crossed the room and gave Harry a quick one-armed hug.

Ron did the same, saying, "Take care of yourself, mate."

Neville was still sitting on the bed, but he nodded gravely to Harry.

Harry shouldered his bag and stopped at the door. "Take care of my sister, will you?"

"Will do, mate."

Then Harry turned and left.

When he reached the Common Room, he was surprised to see Leila in the corner, talking earnestly with Melissa and Demelza. Then she hugged each, said a few last words, and darted toward the portrait hole, carrying a small satchel.

Harry followed her out into the corridor. "Leila, what are you doing?" he said once they were away from the other students.

She jumped and spun around. "Harry! Don't do that!" she exclaimed, groping in thin air until she caught the corner of his cloak and yanked it off. "If you must know, I'm going with you."

"No!" Harry protested, but before he could continue, Leila turned and stalked towards the Headmistress's office.

"My mind is made up. I'm going with you. I'll come back to Hogwarts after the Aperio is reversed."

"But we don't even know where we're going! It's not safe!"

She turned and narrowed her eyes. "Like I'll be any safer here. No, Harry, this time I'm not staying behind and hiding. You're the last family I have left, and I'm sticking with you until..." Her voice broke, but she continued on bravely. "...until you're gone."

Harry gave her a long look. "Thanks, Leila. I appreciate it," he said quietly.

They both turned and continued down the corridor in silence. Finally Harry spoke again. "I'm curious, though, how on earth did you convince McGonagall and the rest to let you go?"

He thought he saw a flicker of a smile on her face. "I had plenty of time to...oh, what's that Muggle saying? Make my case. I can be very persuasive when I want to."

"I know," Harry muttered. She laughed half-heartedly.

"Anyway, you were gone for a long time. What were you doing, anyway, Harry? Packing everything but the bathroom sink?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No! I was..." He fell silent, not sure if he wanted to tell her what he'd really been doing, but she beat him to it.

"Probably spilling all your deep dark secrets to Jeremy, huh?"

"Actually, it was Jeremy, Ron and Neville," Harry said dryly. "And don't start harping on me...I saw you talking to Demelza and Melissa. What were you telling them?"

"Only that you were OK and we were leaving and I didn't know when I would be back," Leila replied.

They reached the gargoyle, and Harry suddenly realized he didn't know the password.

"You ran off before McGonagall could tell you," Leila said, smirking. "My brilliant brother..."

"I'll have you know that I am much more intelligent than you are," Harry countered.

"Do you need to be reminded of how many times you splinched yourself in Apparation lessons last year?"

Harry groaned. "I don't even want to know. Just say the password!"

"Astrology," Leila told the gargoyle, who leapt aside immediately.

When they reached the office at the top of the revolving staircase, the adults were involved in deep conversation and didn't immediately notice the two teenagers enter.

“...warn the Order...” Lupin was saying.
“...Metamorphagus...completely unexpected...”

“Ah, Harry,” McGonagall said, finally noticing him. “And Leila too. Good. Remus’s luggage is here, so you should depart soon.”

Harry pulled his sister over to the circle. Sirius stood up and looked sadly at both of them. “I guess this is goodbye.”

Harry gave his godfather one last hug before Sirius released him and embraced Leila. He whispered something in her ear that Harry couldn’t hear. Leila’s eyes widened, but she nodded and Sirius looked pleased. In a weird, sad sort of way.

Snape helped Lupin stand, and the four stood in a circle. Thin ropes shot out of McGonagall’s wand, binding the luggage together and attaching it to the Portkey, which the Headmistress handed to Harry. Leila, Snape, and Lupin reached out and touched a part of the dustpan.

“I will miss each of you,” she told them. “Please do your best to make things turn out better in your own world than they did here.”

Lupin nodded gravely. “Best of wishes to you, Minerva,” he said.

Harry looked over at Leila, who was next to him. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, but she looked nervous.

Harry met McGonagall’s eyes. “Thank you,” he said. “For everything.”

She sighed. “Activate,” she said, and the office vanished.

It was the longest Portkey ride Harry’d ever experienced. The spinning seemed to go on and on. “How long does this take?” Leila shouted, her voice barely carrying in the wind.

“Dunno!” Harry shouted. By the amount of time they’d been spinning wildly through space, he was sure they were going to a place that was far away from Hogwarts. They’d been in the air for at least two minutes by now.

Then, as suddenly as the it had begun, it ended. Harry was slammed into the ground and just barely kept himself from falling. He grabbed Leila's arm just in time keep her from sprawling on the floor as well.

Leila gasped, and Harry looked up. They were standing in a room the size of the Great Hall, but it was much more magnificent. Chandeliers sparkling with diamonds hung from the domed ceiling decorated with Michelangelo-style paintings. The floor was white marble; the walls adorned with heavy tapestries.

Then his attention was brought back to the person standing directly in front of the little group. She was taller than Hagrid and dressed extravagantly in fur. Harry recognized her immediately.

"Weelcome," Madame Maxime said in a throaty voice. "Weelcome to Beauxbatons."

Author's Note: Kudos to the people who guessed France! Be prepared to meet some new characters next chapter--some you may be expecting, and some I'm positive you're not expecting.

WE REACHED A THOUSAND REVIEWS! OK, no more begging from me. I've gotten what I want. I do hope you'll still give me some feedback on the story, though... I like hearing your opinions. Here's the next question for the reviews: Who's the next "new character" we're going to meet?

Favorite Story of the Week: *Hogwarts High*, by Siriusly Amused (189885). GO READ IT! This story proves that you don't have to have magic for life to be interesting. Featuring a battle for custody (between the Dursleys and Sirius), a Mafia-style organization run by "Tom" and they're recruiting, lots of parties, romance and drama, and hilarious characters! (you think Fred and George were bad in canon? Here they're worse!)

Chapter 49

The first thing Madame Maxime did was offer the visitors a tour. Lupin passed, saying he needed to rest. Snape declined as well, muttering something about wasted time touring fancy overrated prep schools, but Harry suspected his former Potions teacher was actually concerned about Lupin and didn't want to leave the werewolf alone without proper medical attention. Lupin's and Snape's relationship was a tense one, that was for sure, Harry mused. But Lupin had more going for him than the other Marauders simply because he had been fairly decent to Snape during the school years.

Harry wanted to skip the tour as well, feeling slightly nauseous from the extended Portkey ride, but one look at Leila and he politely accepted Madame Maxime's offer. It was obvious that his sister really wanted to see the rest of the school, but he was pretty sure that if he declined, she would too.

Madame Maxime summoned several maids dressed in crisp blue uniforms to show Snape and Lupin their quarters. "You must both rest first," she said. "Tomorrow we can work on ze Apeerio." Then she led Harry and Leila through the double doors and into the rest of Beaubaxtons.

The French equivalent of Hogwarts was definitely much more magnificent, if not quite as large. The square school building that housed the classrooms, ballroom, dining hall, and dormitories was two stories tall and had a hollow center which contained beautiful magical gardens. Everything about the school was faultless. Not a speck of dirt could be found on any of the elaborate paintings or graceful statues. The floors were all made of marble, and the walls decorated with silken tapestries. The guest rooms as well were much nicer than anything Harry had ever stayed in. They probably outshined the very best of Muggle hotels.

Leila's eyes bulged as Madame Maxime led them into rooms that only increased in finesse and luxury. Harry hadn't realized it before, but his sister definitely wasn't a tomboy. She enjoyed pretty things as much as Ginny and Hermione, and like Harry's two closest female

friends, his sister tended to hide her attraction, probably because of all the boys she hung out with.

At first, Harry had been worried that the students would talk and word might get back to Voldemort concerning their location. The school could be attacked or threatened, and Harry definitely didn't want his presence to put any of the students into danger. When he questioned the Headmistress, though, she just laughed. "Oh, 'arry, don't you worry one bit! Ze wards at Beaubaxtons are ze strongest in ze continent. And none of ze students weell be telling zey're parents. Zey cannot, because of the spell I 'ave cast upon them." She went on to explain a complicated Fidelius Charm-like spell that one of her professors had developed. It insured that while the students would be able to see and converse with the visitors, they would not be able to tell anyone of their presence at Beaubaxtons. If questioned by their parents or anyone else, they would suddenly and conveniently forget about the visitors. They also were bodily unable to write a single word which might reveal the visitors to the letter's recipient. When Maxime finished, Harry felt much better and was able to enjoy the tour.

Beaubaxtons was considerably smaller than Hogwarts, and much more picky about the students it accepted into the school. Only the brightest witches and wizards had a chance at surviving in the school's intense scholastic programme. The school had none of the Pureblood-Muggleborn discriminations that were prominent in Durmstrang and characteristic of the British Ministry of Magic, though. The French seemed to be more open-minded, and Harry appreciated this immensely.

Harry didn't like the school's rigidity, though, and soon began to miss the carefree atmosphere of Hogwarts. Here the students had perfect manners, diligent study habits, and uniformity in all areas of their lives. The portraits did not call out greetings as Harry and Leila passed, there were no friendly ghosts floating in and out of solid walls, and there was no poltergeist to wreck havoc in the halls or pelt unsuspecting first years with water balloons. Madame Maxime was strict and didn't tolerate horse-play of any sort in her school.

When the Headmistress finally showed Harry and Leila to their quarters and told them a maid would bring them some food soon,

Harry sighed with relief as the door shut behind her. He quickly found the bed and flopped down on it, closing his eyes.

In the background, he could hear Leila exploring the room, opening drawers, cabinets, and doors. "There's another room here," she announced. "I guess it's mine. And there's a bathroom between the rooms. I get to shower first."

"Fine," Harry said listlessly. He vaguely wondered how Lupin was doing, but he knew that Snape would see that the werewolf was recovering properly.

The bed shook a little as Leila sat down on the edge. "Beaubaxtons is nice," she said.

"Mmm."

"I mean, it's really fancy and all. Did you hear Madame Maxime saying that all the silverware and plates here are made of gold?"

"Yeah."

"And the students seem nice," Leila continued. "Did you see the classrooms? Nothing like the dungeons we have to study in at Hogwarts."

Harry said nothing.

"But Hogwarts is still better."

Harry opened one eye and looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know," she said, shrugging. "I guess the school's just...friendlier, if that makes any sense."

"It makes sense." That was the right word to describe Hogwarts: Friendly. And Harry was already missing it.

There was a long pause. "Harry?" Leila said in a small voice. "How long do you think it will take you lot to reverse the Aperio?"

Harry pushed himself up on his elbows and opened both eyes. "Dunno," he said quietly. "It could take a day, it could take a month. If it's really complicated magic, it could take a year."

"A *year*?"

"From what Lupin and McGonagall have told me, there has only been one documented case in history of a reversed Aperio, and the spell used was a very unstable one. It needs to be modified and reworked to fit our situation, and that could take quite a while."

"Are Snape and Lupin going to do the research?"

Harry thought this over. "I don't think so. I think if McGonagall had thought that the three of us together could figure out the right spells to reverse the Aperio, she'd have kept us in the country. I think she had us come to Beaubaxtons for a reason. I mean, look around. It's full of brilliant minded students and the professors are probably geniuses."

"I wonder who."

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and a blue-uniformed maid stepped in, carrying two trays of food. After she left, Harry and Leila quickly devoured the food. Most of it Harry didn't recognize, but he was too hungry to care. Breakfast seemed like a year ago.

"Where do you think we are?" Leila asked between mouthfuls of chicken. "I mean, when we saw the gardens, I didn't get cold at all."

"They could be magically heated," Harry said, frowning. "But you're right—it is milder here. Look out the window."

The window overlooked the outer walls of Beaubaxtons. The lawns were green and the sun was shining. If the windowpane hadn't been cool to his touch, Harry would have suspected that it was summertime in France.

Leila looked. "There's no snow," she observed.

"I think I heard Madame Maxime say something about the location being close to Marseille," Harry said thoughtfully.

"What's Marseille?"

"A large city on the southern coast of France," Harry replied automatically, then he grinned apologetically. "Muggle geography class."

Beaubaxtons was located on the southern coast of France. That would explain the thin materiel of the students' uniforms. Harry smiled, remembering the Triwizard tournament and the French students' reactions when they got to Hogwarts. He now understood their surprise—Hogwarts was practically a dump compared to this palace. No wonder tuition here was higher.

She fell silent, still gazing thoughtfully out the window. Harry suddenly felt very weary. All he wanted to do was crawl into the king-sized bed and sleep for twenty-four hours straight. Maybe longer.

"I wonder if our luggage is in our rooms," Leila mused. "I'm going to go check on mine."

Harry grunted and laid back down on the bed as she left the room. In a minute, she was back.

"It's here. And I have something I need to give you."

Harry sat up again, intrigued. Leila held out a brown leather book, well-worn and dusty. He took it, and with his index finger traced the raised letters on the cover: Leila's Family.

"It's the photo album," Leila said softly. "The one I promised I'd find. I found it, just after you and Sirius left last summer. I put it in my trunk, but forgot about it with all the worry about you..." She swallowed. "I found it again when I was packing."

Harry still held the book in his hands, not trusting himself to speak. "Thanks," he finally said. "It means a lot to me."

She stood up, her hands fluttering nervously. "I'll leave now, if you want."

"No, stay," Harry said quickly, surprising himself. "I want you to stay."

And so she stayed, and told him stories as they flipped through the photo album. The album began with Harry's and Leila's baby pictures, then moved progressively through the years. Curious as to which year the pictures would end with, Harry flipped to the back, and was surprised to see photographs of his birthday party that summer.

"Mum enchanted the album so she could automatically add the best photos as soon as she took them," Leila explained.

Harry listened intently as his sister recounted the stories behind each picture. These were the memories he'd take with him when they returned to the former reality. These were the times he wanted to recall—not the day his parents had died, not the weeks of imprisonment in the Death Eater's headquarters, not the nighttime fight against the Death Eaters in Hogsmeade...

He fell asleep that night thinking about his parents.

"You prat. Get up!"

Someone was pulling at his covers, yanking the pillow from underneath his head, calling his name...

"Madame Maxime, Snape, and Lupin are waiting for *you*! Get your sorry self out of bed!"

Groaning, Harry did as he was told. When he found his glasses, Leila's face came into sharp focus.

"Heavens. You look awful," she chided. "Go change, and I'll figure out what to do with your hair."

As soon as he'd pulled on jeans and a shirt, Leila entered the room again. "Stand still," she commanded, then waved her wand at his

head. An instant later, her face broke into a smile. "Now look in the mirror."

Harry looked, and to his astonishment, his usually untidy hair was for the most part flattened against his head.

"Splash some water on your face, and then let's go," Leila said impatiently, tapping her foot on the marble.

"What about breakfast?" Harry mumbled, drying his face.

"You missed it. Let's go!"

Leila led him out into the corridor and down a long hall. "This is the way the maid said to go," she explained when he gave her a puzzled look.

The main corridor was teeming with students making their way to their next classes. Finally Harry and Leila reached an ornately carved door next to a statue of a swan.

"This is it," Leila said, and pushed open the door.

Harry found himself in a small but elaborately decorated room. Five oak chairs were arranged in a semicircle. Lupin and Snape were sitting on the chairs to the right, and Madame Maxime was engaged in a lively French conversation with a little man who was completely bald, but had a long white beard.

Harry stopped in his tracks and his jaw dropped.

"Come on, Harry!" Leila tugged on his arm. "What? What is it?"

"That's... that's Nicholas Flamel!" Harry had only seen the man's picture once, in the book Hermione had shown him, but Flamel's face was permanently etched into his mind.

Flamel was in the middle of a sentence, but he paused and said, "Eh? What's that?"

Leila shoved Harry forward. He was still gaping at the legendary owner of the Philosopher's Stone. "You're Nicholas Flamel!"

The man's grey eyes twinkled. "That I am."

Snape scowled and opened his mouth, probably to make some derogatory statement about Harry's level of intelligence, but Lupin got there first.

"You've surely got a gift for stating the obvious, Harry, though your astonishment is understandable," he said dryly. "Come and sit down. We've been waiting for you."

Harry obeyed, still casting incredulous glances at Flamel. "Stop staring," Leila hissed as they sat down in two empty seats.

"I can't help it!" Harry said in a low voice. "It's not every day you meet someone who's over six hundred years old."

Leila's eyes bulged. "*Six hundred?*" she gasped.

"Six hundred and eighty nine to be exact," Flamel said from across the room. He smiled warmly at the two teenagers. "And you are?"

"Harry Potter, and this is my sister Leila."

"And which of you is the third in the Aperio?"

"I am," Harry said.

Nicholas Flamel looked him over. "And have we met before?"

Harry shook his head.

The older man cocked his head. "You're certain?"

"Yes, sir. We haven't met."

"Then how did you recognize me, if I might be so forward to ask?"

Harry glanced over at Lupin, who nodded slightly. He then launched into a short explanation of his first year at Hogwarts. Flamel listened intently.

“So Albus and I destroyed the stone in the end,” he sighed. “I guess it was for the best.”

“What happened in this time line?” Harry asked curiously.

Flamel smiled sadly. “When Albus died, I had nothing left in England. Perenelle and I packed up our things and left Devon to move to sunny France. Madame Maxime made me an offer I couldn’t resist—a retirement at beautiful Beaubaxtons, teaching when I felt like it, studying in their marvelous library, and relaxing by the sea and in the beautiful gardens. How could I say no?” He winked at Maxime, who beamed back. “Besides, I needed to improve my French—the last time I used it, I was conversing with Victor Hugo about his latest book.”

“And the stone?” Harry said hesitantly. If Voldemort had gotten it in this reality, he’d be immortal forever...

“Safe,” Flamel said. “I can assure you of that.”

“But...”

“Voldemort has not had nearly seven hundred years of knowledge accumulation,” Flamel said pointedly, and Harry reddened. “It is a fair anxiety,” the man continued kindly. “But Voldemort will never find it. Only I know the location, and it is protected by spells so strong that if anyone other than Perenelle or myself were to remove it, it would automatically dissolve into dust. We’d rather give up our long life than see it in the wrong hands.”

“Mr. Flameel ‘as kindly offered to assist you in reversing ze Apeerio,” Madame Maxime said, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Ah, yes, the Apeerio,” Flamel said, nodding courteously to Maxime. “I have been reading extensively about the strange phenomenon which causes three individuals to find themselves in a world unlike their own...”

There was a knock at the door. Madame Maxime huffed, "Oh, who could zat be?" and quickly crossed the room.

She flung the door open and Harry turned to see who had interrupted the meeting.

"I'm sorry, Madame, but Minister Grégoire just floored you a very important letter," the girl said in a tiny voice. A voice Harry recognized. "He said I must deliver it immediately."

He strained to get a better look. The girl's thick brown hair was twisted up in an elaborate clip. Her face was perfectly made up, and she was wearing the smart blue Beaubaxtons uniform. Her brown eyes quickly scanned the room, then darted back to Madame Maxime.

Harry wouldn't have recognized her, had it not been for the voice... the same voice he'd heard millions of times...

The Headmistress held out a hand for the letter. "Thank you. You may leave," she said curtly.

The girl turned to leave, but Harry was already on his feet, heading towards the door...

"Hermione!"

Author's Note: Great big HUGE apology for the week-long wait. At least I'm not like those authors that update once every six months... that really pisses me off. But now I know the true definition of the word "busy." I can't promise new chapters every day like I did during the summer because I've just started college. That's right... I'm taking Nursing and Microbiology and a couple other classes that are taking most of my time up with studying (It ends up about nineteen hours in class each week). And then add two jobs and you get a very busy college student. Don't expect another update for at least another week. I can only find time to write on weekends. This story's almost done, anyway... And I have a feeling you'll want a sequel.

OK, you all guessed Hermione, but were you expecting Nicholas Flamel? He's one of the first people I thought of when I started

planning out the new universe. I was always disappointed that we didn't get to meet him in canon, but I always imagined him a little like Dumbledore, but even more intelligent.

Many of you thought the new character would be Fleur. I must remind you that she's dead. (See chapter seven.) And I quote:

"What about you, Bill? Weren't you dating that French girl, Fleur? What happened to her?"

"She died in another Death Eater attack," Bill said softly.

Chapter 50

“Hermione!”

The girl at the door froze. There was a moment of tense silence, but then Madame Maxime huffed. “What ees the meaning of zis? We are wasting valuable time! You were out of place in coming ‘ere, Miss Granger. You may go now. Really, we don’t have time for zis...”

But her voice trailed off as Hermione pushed past her, as in a trance. “How did you know my name?”

“I knew you...once...” Harry said, staring at her. She had changed, a lot. Gone was the bookish, easy-going Hermione he remembered, replaced by a stiffer, primmer girl that reminded Harry a lot of Fleur when he’d first met her.

Her eyes narrowed. “How can that be? Are you a Seer?”

“No, I...”

But Madame Maxime had finally found her voice again. “No! You ‘ave been ‘ere too long, ‘Ermione. You must leave now. And you...” she rounded on Harry. “I ‘ave been very generous and given you protection ‘ere. But I will not tolerate you endangering the lives of my students like zis. I don’t care whether you knew ‘er or not, it is unacceptable and I will not allow it!”

“But...”

“No, I absoluteely refuse! Miss Granger, leave immediately.”

“Madame...”

“Now!”

A somewhat dazed Hermione was ushered back out of the room. Harry glared at Madame Maxime, but suddenly Leila was tugging on his arm. “Come sit down,” she instructed softly.

Harry slumped down into the chair between Lupin and Leila, crossing his arms. Lupin clicked his tongue and shook his head. "No need to pout, Harry. You're too old for that. It was a very foolish thing to do, though."

"Why not?" Harry said, kicking at the carpet with his trainer.

"Because who knows how she would have reacted?" Lupin replied. "Sure the spell should keep her from telling other people, but it won't help if someone uses Legilimancy to extract the information. There's a reason we've only kept told a limited number of people about the Aperio."

Harry and Leila exchanged glances.

Lupin sighed. "I know you miss your friends, Harry, especially Hermione, but telling her isn't a wise thing to do. And Harry, even if you do tell her, she isn't the same Hermione you knew."

Harry's shoulders slumped. He knew Lupin was right—he couldn't expect Hermione to be the old Hermione he knew. She had changed, probably even more than Ron. It was still hard, though, to see her after six months and not be allowed to even say hi.

Madame Maxime and Nicholas Flamel were exchanging looks as well. Flamel shook his head slightly and the Headmistress pursed her lips, then turned back to the visitors.

"You know why you're 'ere," she began. "I've asked Professor Flamel to aid you in ze reversal of ze Aperio. Since we 'ave no idea how long this process will take, I will extend my weelcome indefinitely. You 'ave been shown your rooms and I trust zat you all slept comfortably last night. You can partake of your meals in our dining hall, or 'ave ze maids bring you food in your rooms. Ze grounds are yours for ze exploring, but I must ask zat you keep away from ze students. Zey 'ave been told not to bother you, and I'd prefer zat as little interaction as possible is maintained. Are you in agreement with that?"

They nodded.

“And so I will turn over ze time to Nicholas. I ‘ave other duties to attend to, so with your permission I will leave.”

She nodded to them and to Flamel, and left. The little old man stood and dragged his chair to the front.

“You’ll forgive me for sitting down,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “My bones are a little achy this morning. Now, where shall we begin?”

By noontime, Harry’s head ached. Flamel wasn’t called the oldest—and smartest—Wizard in the world for nothing. When Flamel had heard from Madame Maxime that three members of an Aperio were arriving, he’d researched the topic thoroughly. A little too thoroughly for Harry’s liking. Fifteen minutes into the lecture, his head was swimming with terms and hypothesizes. Leila, who was generally better than Harry at magical theory, was shaking her head perplexedly. Even Snape and Lupin were looking baffled.

The gist of the matter was that only one documented Aperio had ever occurred before in history, and the record wasn’t the best. The members weren’t able to explain exactly how they got back, only that it involved a complex spell and several rituals. One of the incantations mentioned, though, was *Priori novo fatumetas*.

Flamel admitted that he himself was quite confused as to how the reversal was to be accomplished, and he said the process would quite likely take weeks, if not months. A proper spell had to be formed of many incantations, altered to fit the specific situation. To form the spell, Flamel first needed to know detailed information about each member of the Aperio.

Thus the week was laid out: In the morning, Flamel would question Harry, Snape, and Lupin, occasionally calling on Leila for information about the new reality that the original three couldn’t answer. In the afternoons, however, they were free to roam about the school and gardens as Flamel retreated to his chambers to study and assess the progress made.

It wasn’t until the third day that Harry and Leila ventured to the dining hall for lunch. Unlike Hogwarts’ Great Hall, round tables were

scattered around the square room. Students sat wherever they wished. A special table was set aside for visitors, and Leila and Harry quickly made their way to it.

None of the students tried to talk to them. For the most part, they were ignored, and Harry really didn't mind. "I think they probably have quite a lot of visitors come through here," Leila said thoughtfully as she bit into a piece of bread covered with peach marmalade. "I mean, Hogwarts doesn't even have a visitor's table."

Harry conceded the point, then busied himself with several delicious-looking pastries.

"I do wish they'd talk to us, though," Leila continued, frowning.

Harry paused. "You do?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, I do. I know Madame Maxime asked them to leave us alone and everything, but I really want someone to talk to. I have so many questions about the school and the Headmistress is always busy..."

Harry swallowed the bite of pastry. "I suppose it would be interesting to talk to some of the students, but what would we say if they asked us questions? It's less complicated this way."

That afternoon, Leila wanted to go to the library again. She and Harry explored the shelves of books for an hour or so, and then ventured to the gardens. Outside, a cool wind was blowing, but the bright sun kept them from getting chilled.

Leila relaxed on a bench in an alcove and stretched her legs out. "I need a tan," she complained. "Those stupid Hogwarts robes always keep my legs so white during the winter."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond, since he honestly couldn't remember ever thinking about needing a tan. He wisely kept his mouth shut.

“The sun isn’t very hot, but maybe it’ll help,” Leila said, and promptly rolled her sleeves and pant legs up and stretched out on the bench. She looked as content as a cat by a fire.

Harry wandered over to some unique looking flowers and pretended to be interested in them. On the bench, Leila had relaxed and her eyes were half closed. Harry moved on to the next shrub, wishing plants interested him as much as they did Neville.

A rustling behind him caused him to turn. “I hear someone coming,” Leila said quietly, sitting up and cocking her head.

Harry stared at her. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Shhhh!”

The Beaubaxtons gardens were arranged as a loosely plotted maze. The bench the siblings had stopped at was in a little open space surrounded by high shrubs and unique foliage. There was only one entrance, and Harry watched it.

“How do you do that? Hear people coming, I mean.”

“Quiet! I’m listening.”

Harry studied his sister. Head tilted, she screwed up her face in concentration. After a few seconds, she nodded. “The person is coming from that direction,” she said softly, pointing to the left. Harry knew better than to argue with her. He’d learned months ago never to try and sneak up on his sister. She had an amazing sense of hearing and was impossible to startle. Harry wondered if she could even hear silent spells coming.

Sure enough, Harry heard light footsteps from the other side of the shrub. “It’s a girl,” Leila whispered. Harry was about to ask how she could tell the gender of an individual by the noises they made, but Leila held a finger to her lips.

They waited, tentatively, watching for the girl to make herself known. The footsteps followed an invisible path, looping around the outside of the courtyard Harry and Leila were in. The noises got louder and

louder, and suddenly Hermione rounded the corner and stopped in the archway, mouth open. She was wearing her blue Beaubaxtons uniform and carrying a stack of books.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Hermione promptly dropped all her books.

Parchments went flying everywhere, and Harry and Leila dove to help the flustered girl collect her belongings.

"I'm so sorry, oh, I feel horrible... I'm really, really sorry..." Hermione blubbered as she frantically gathered stacks of parchments. "I shouldn't have tried to carry so many books..."

"Some things don't change," Harry muttered as he put another thick book on the quickly growing stack.

"Merlin...I've made such a mess..."

"Harry," Leila said in a low voice. "Look at this."

She handed him one of the papers, and he took it. It was covered with careful diagrams and lists. At the top was a title: *Possible Reasons for an Aperio and Their Consequences in the Flow of Time*.

Hermione had noticed. "Give that back!" she demanded, but Harry quickly straightened and took a step back, holding the paper out of her reach.

"You figured it out," he said bluntly, then took a second look at the stack of books she'd dropped. Titles like *Tampering with Time*, *Reality Reversed: A Tale of Dimensional Proportions*, and *Worlds and Realities as They Relate to Time and Space* caught his eye.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione said, twisting her hands. "Give that back!"

"You actually researched it and figured out why we were here," Harry said again, amazed. McGonagall, Moody, his mum, Sirius...none of them had ever worked it out that Harry wasn't really from this world in

the six months he'd been there. Hermione had taken the clues she'd heard and seen and solved the puzzle in three days.

"Why are you here?" he asked her. He could see that Hermione was quickly resuming her Beaubaxtons posture.

"That's none of your business," she said coolly. "If you'll excuse me..." She reached for her parchment, but Harry kept it out of reach.

"Not until you tell us why you came."

"I wasn't looking for you, if that's what you want to know," she said, glaring at them. "I often study here; it's quieter than the library even. I was just surprised to see you two here. I really must be going..."

"Not yet," Harry said firmly. "You already know about the Aperio."

She only continued to glare at him.

"You must be curious about the other reality."

He could tell Hermione was weakening.

"Why don't you stay and talk?"

"I can't... It wouldn't be right."

Harry sighed. "Is this because of what Madame Maxime said?"

Hermione's shoulders drooped a little. "She said I wasn't to talk to you at all."

"That was because she didn't want you finding out why we were here," Leila interjected. "Now you know, so it really can't hurt for you to talk to us now."

"Besides, no one will know," Harry said. "We can put up people-repelling charms and anti-eavesdropping wards if it makes you feel better."

Hermione wavered on the edge of decision. Finally, her curiosity made her cave. "Only for a few moments," she said briskly, then took a seat on one of the benches, laying her stack of books beside her.

Harry handed her back her parchment and she took it silently. Then he cast a silencing spell on the three and then made himself comfortable on the bench across from Hermione. Leila plopped down next to him.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat. "I know I've got loads of questions for you, but I'll let you go first. Anything you want to know?"

Hermione looked down at her lap, then up again, a little more shyly. "How did you know my name? I mean," she continued quickly. "That's one thing I can't figure out. If you really are from an Aperio, what would have changed the realities so we would have met? The Dark Lord of Britain hates Muggleborns, and I can't see him ever *not* making the laws that forced me to attend school in France. Unless...unless you came here as well. But you're not Muggleborn..."

"How do you know?"

"I checked the family history records. The library has a magically updated version of the British genealogies," she said simply. "I overheard Madame Maxime mentioning your names and figured out for myself who each of you were. You're Harry Potter."

He nodded. "Go on."

"Your father was a pureblood, and your mother a Muggleborn..." Hermione frowned. "How did she stay in Britain, anyway?"

Harry shrugged. "Not sure. Leila?"

"Magical records aren't hard to alter," Leila said. "When the animosity between Death Eaters and Muggleborns began to grow, Mum and Dad paid big money for all the records in Britain to be altered. Mum was added to the Prewett family, actually, as a second cousin or something like that. They figured they'd be safe by altering the genealogy records in Britain, so didn't bother with records in other

countries, which is probably why you were able to discover the truth so easily.”

Hermione nodded, but Harry was surprised. “Mum really did that?”

“It was either that or flee the country,” Leila said matter-of-factly. “If you pull any of her records, it’ll say her maiden name was Prewett. You can do anything if you have enough money in the Wizarding world.”

“But how did you know me?” Hermione said, obviously not distracted from her original question. “How?”

Harry and Leila exchanged glances. “Um, it’s rather complicated,” Harry hedged.

“I’ve got time.”

So he told her about the prophecy that Trelawney made on one dark night at the Hog’s Head. Hermione’s eyes were bulging by the time he finished.

“A prophecy,” she breathed. “I hadn’t thought of that. So Voldemort was destroyable in your world. But...but when did he return?”

“In my fourth year at Hogwarts,” Harry told her.

She pondered this. “Fourth year. I suppose that would have meant I was there as well.”

Harry grinned at her. “I met you in the Hogwarts Express on my very first day of school.”

Hermione’s face softened. “And?”

“We were best friends for six years,” Harry said softly. “You, me, and Ron.”

“Ron?”

“Ron Weasley. The sixth of seven siblings, red haired, has a temper, plays chess, so loyal that I’m sure the Sorting Hat offered to put him in Hufflepuff.”

Hermione laughed. “Sounds like an odd friendship.”

“Odd isn’t the right word. A Muggle-raised boy-who-lived, a pureblood overshadowed Weasley, and a brilliant Muggleborn girl with bushy hair.”

Hermione smiled. “It was bushy, wasn’t it? The first thing I did when I got here was look up all the hair care spells I could find. I didn’t fit in here at all.” She sobered. “Did I fit in there?”

Harry considered this. “Not at first. I mean,” he added apologetically. “You always were too smart for your own good.”

She shrugged and her cheeks got pink. “I’m not that smart.”

“Hermione, if you’re at all like the Hermione I knew, you’re brilliant. Not just above average, you’re a genius. Merlin, you figured out the Aperio!”

She stared at the ground for a few moments. “How did we become friends?”

So Harry told her about the troll. That story led to the story of Quirrel and the Philosopher’s Stone. Hermione kept asking questions, and Harry eventually found himself outlining his six years at Hogwarts. She listened intently, and several times had him elaborate in parts that especially related to the timeline differences, like the night of Voldemort’s rebirth. Harry tried to emphasize hers and Ron’s parts in his confrontations with Voldemort. After all, he wouldn’t have survived the first year if it hadn’t been for them.

When Harry finished, Hermione rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Um, Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Were Ron and I... you know, ever...”

Leila giggled as Harry reddened. “Do I have to answer that?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, fixing him with one of her looks.

He shrugged. “I dunno. At times I thought you two liked each other, and I think that maybe eventually you would have ended up together. But other people wouldn’t have guessed—you bickered and fought all the time. Darn it, why do girls always ask these kinds of questions?”

Leila’s giggles turned into laughter. “For that very reason, my dear brother. Because we’re *girls*.”

Harry threw up his hands in surrender. “I’m never going to understand females.”

Both girls joined in the laughter this time. Then Hermione said, “It’s weird, isn’t it? I was a part of your life, but I don’t even remember it. It’s like knowing that a part of my life was lost and I’ll never get it back.”

Harry sighed. “I know what you mean.”

Leila jabbed him with her elbow. “Oh, but it’s so much more fun when you don’t remember our childhood.”

“Thanks!”

They were quiet for a few more minutes. Suddenly the chimes from the clock tower rang over the grounds, and the three looked up. Harry suddenly noticed that the shadows were longer. Hermione jumped slightly.

“I should go... they’ll expect me at dinner.” She stood and looked awkwardly from Leila to Harry.

Harry stood quickly. “Listen, Hermione...” he started.

“What?” she said, almost breathlessly.

“I was wondering...”

“Yes?”

“Will you help us solve the Aperiio?”

Author’s Note: Again, I apologize for the wait. College sucks, it really does. Next chapter: The Aperiio Reversed.

This chapter is unbetaed, so I apologize for any grammer/canon errors.

Chapter 51

It took quite a bit of convincing before Hermione agreed to help them. She finally grudgingly said yes, though Harry had the feeling they'd just convinced her into doing something she'd wanted to do in the first place. Girls.

It took even more convincing before Lupin, Snape, Flamel, and Madame Maxime allowed it.

"Zis is an outrage!" Madame Maxime cried, her face red. "You 'ave gone completely against my orders! I told you not to tell any of my students, and what do you do?"

"I didn't tell her!" Harry argued. "I'm telling you, she's the brightest witch of her age, and she *figured it out herself*."

"Eempossible," the Headmistress huffed, but Flamel looked thoughtful.

"You put the pieces together and came to the conclusion that these three were involved in an Aperi?" he asked Hermione gently, and she nodded, keeping her head high.

"How do you know this Hermione is the same as the other Hermione knowledge-wise?" Lupin said skeptically. "Harry, that was a very irrational thing to do."

"Typical, if you ask me," Snape muttered, glaring at Harry.

Harry sent him a dirty look back. "You don't know what you're talking about. Do you know what she's done? In our first year, it was Hermione who finally put the pieces together about the Philosopher's Stone. She rescued Ron and me from the Devil's Snare because she'd read ahead in our Herbology book. Then she figured out Snape's logic puzzle involving the Potions *on her own*."

Lupin still looked skeptical, but Snape's eyebrows had shot up. Harry wondered if Dumbledore had ever told Snape how a first year Muggleborn had bested his obstacle in a matter of minutes.

“Second year. It was Hermione who solved the puzzle of the Basilisk. She put the clues together when no other teacher could figure out where the entrance to the chamber was or how the Basilisk was getting around the school. And she made Polyjuice Potion for me and Ron so we could sneak into the Slytherin Common Room and question Draco Malfoy.”

Snape looked incredulous. Harry knew that the Potions Master was calculating how many students in his N.E.W.T. classes back at Hogwarts could successfully brew Polyjuice Potion.

“Third year. She was the only person in the school to figure out that Lupin was a werewolf. The only one! And then she covered for him the rest of the year.”

This reality’s Hermione had gasped and stepped back, but Flamel and Maxime didn’t look surprised. Madame Maxime said something sharp to Hermione in French, and the girl timidly nodded and moved closer again.

“She also used a Time-Turner all year long to go to twice as many classes as Ron and I were attending, all because she wanted to learn as much as possible.”

Lupin was nodding now. Flamel’s eyes were twinkling as he looked from Hermione to Harry, and Snape had crossed his arms, but Harry knew that he was thinking.

“In my fourth year, she solved the mystery of Rita Skeeter.” Both Snape and Lupin looked surprised. “Hermione wanted to know why Rita knew everything, even information from private conversations. She did some researching and found out that Rita was an illegal Animagus. She made Rita swear not to write for a year, and then bribed her into writing my story for the Quibbler.”

Lupin and Snape looked amazed. Madame Maxime was still scowling, but Harry knew he was making progress.

“Want to know where I learned all the defense spells I know? Hermione. She looked them up and made me practice them for the Triwizard tournament. In my fifth year, she was the one who came up

with the idea for Dumbledore's Army and she helped me teach it. In my sixth year, she figured out that Snape was the Half-Blood Prince, and she was always the first to learn the new spells and master new skills. I'm telling you, she can do it. Hermione figured out the Aperio probably in less time than Lupin here, and definitely quicker than Snape and me. This only proves that she's just as smart as the other Hermione. If you give her a chance, you won't regret it."

Hermione shot Harry a grateful smile. "Thanks," she mouthed.

Lupin was scratching his chin thoughtfully, Flamel was still "twinkling" in a very Dumbledorish way, and Snape was scowling at the ground with his arms crossed. Madame Maxime was scowling too, but Harry knew that Snape's scowl simply meant he was thinking; the Headmistress was genuinely irate.

"Now see here," she began angrily. "She ees my student, and I will not have you endangering her like zis... She 'as three more years of school left, and..."

"I am of age!" Hermione cried furiously. "And if I were at Hogwarts, I'd only have a half year of school left."

"Impudent girl," the Headmistress hissed. "You do not know what you are saying! You are young and untrustworthy..."

Hermione's face was beet red. She began to talk very fast in French, and Harry suspected she'd changed languages so they couldn't understand the rude insults Madame Maxime was throwing out. He looked around the room. Lupin was looking helplessly at the pair, but surprisingly enough, Snape was listening, his head tilted in their direction.

"Does Snape know French?" Harry asked Leila.

She nodded. "I overheard him telling Regulus he knew the language at Castaway Cabin."

"Did he know that you would end up at Beauxbatons?"

"I'm not sure. But it's possible that he had a pretty good idea. We had to leave the country, America's too far away, Durmstrang's the Death Eater training school... That left Beauxbatons."

The argument between Maxime and Hermione was winding down. It looked as if Hermione had won. Finally the girl turned to Nicholas Flamel. "I will help you if you will allow it," she said, inclining her head politely.

"Certainly, my dear girl," Flamel said cheerfully. "We'd best get started, then. Maxime?"

Muttering under her breath, the Headmistress turned on her heels and left without a backwards glance.

Watching Hermione and Flamel interact was truly amazing. Flamel certainly had more knowledge, but Hermione was marvelous at coming up with new ideas and angles that Flamel hadn't explored yet. Half the time, though, Harry had no idea what they were talking about.

For the next three days, Harry and Leila only saw Hermione at the morning meetings. Finally they cornered her in the library one afternoon.

"OK, enough!" Leila said, gently pulling the book away from Hermione.

"No, wait... I have to write something down," she protested.

"Later. When's the last time you had a good meal?" Harry asked sternly.

Hermione hung her head. "Um..."

"Just as I thought," Leila said, clicking her tongue. "Well, we're about to fix that. Come."

"Now?" Hermione squeaked. "I can't! I'm on the verge of a breakthrough! If I leave now, my train of thought will be disrupted and who knows what that could do to my research."

“Yeah, and if you have a mental breakdown in a week from over-studying and malnutrition, Harry will never get home,” Leila said sarcastically, taking one of Hermione’s arms. Harry grasped the other one and they gently pulled her away from her stacks of books.

Hermione protested all the way to the dining hall, but by the time Harry and Leila had seated her at the table, she’d fallen into a sort of silent pout. It wasn’t long, though, before Leila started asking questions about Beauxbatons. Hermione answered grudgingly at first, but once she realized that Leila’s interest was genuine, her answers and explanations became more detailed and interesting.

“So is the program here really ten years long?” Leila asked, taking a sip of pumpkin juice and wiping her mouth.

Hermione laughed. “No. You’d think so, huh? Actually, it’s nine years. Students here start at age twelve and end when they’re twenty or twenty-one. It’s because the academic program for first years is harder than that of first years at Hogwarts, and the school administrators feel that children who are older will have higher maturity levels and be better able to handle the stress.”

“Oh, I get it,” Leila muttered. “We just weren’t mature when we went to Hogwarts.”

“How does the program differ here academically?” Harry asked quickly. “Compared to Hogwarts and Durmstrang, I mean.”

Hermione took a dainty bite of custard. “Not that much. We take all the same classes as you except for Divination, and we add an etiquette class. We don’t include the Offensive Dueling class that Durmstrang has in their curriculum, nor do we dabble into Dark Arts like they do in some of their other classes.”

“You don’t do Divination? Lucky,” Leila mumbled, and Harry had to agree.

“I know,” Hermione said, sweeping a strand of hair back. “Divination is a waste of time, if you ask me. Telling the future, palm readings, astrology... It’s all so fickle.”

“Not all,” Harry said quietly. “I’ve met a true Seer.”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. “Oh. I guess you have,” she admitted, eying him. “The prophecy, right?”

Harry nodded, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t much like talking about the prophecy, though he was much better with it than a year ago. He’d come to terms with the “neither can live while the other survives” part and mostly ignored it.

“So, how’s the Aperio work coming?”

Leila slapped his arm. “Harry! She’s supposed to be relaxing!”

“No, no, I’m relaxed now,” Hermione protested. “See?”

“I agree,” Harry said. He really wanted to hear about the progress from Hermione, who could most likely explain it in simple terms. Whenever Flamel talked about the work, Harry felt like he was lost in a sea of new words and concepts.

Leila didn’t look happy, but she grudgingly agreed to let Hermione talk about the Aperio. The other girl launched into a simplified version of Flamel’s explanation that same morning, but this time Harry could understand what she was talking about.

“So you’re saying that you’re missing one of the key runes in the equations?”

Hermione brushed a lock of hair out of her face. “Yes. Professor Flamel and I have been looking for it, but so far we’ve had no luck. Once we find the missing rune, we’ll have all the needed components to formulate a spell and ritual that will allow us to reverse the Aperio.”

Harry stirred his soup thoughtfully. “I’m curious,” he said, finally voicing a question that’d been on his mind for a while. “When the Aperio took place...what happened to this world’s Harry? When I go back will he suddenly appear here? Or is he gone forever?”

Hermione bit her lip. “From what I’ve read, the Aperio takes the soul of the person from the original world and the body of the person from

the new world and combines them. That's why you don't have a scar, Harry. When the Aperio is reversed, you will be transported back into your old body. As to what will happen once you leave, Professor Flamel and I are not entirely sure, but we have a pretty good idea."

"What?"

"The other you won't return. It sounds awful, but the other you, Lupin, and Snape were only acting as placeholders in this world."

Leila put her hand over her mouth. "So the Harry I knew wasn't real," she whispered. "That's awful."

Hermione sighed. "There can be only one real version, don't you see? The Aperio happens so the original people can see what things would have been like if their wishes had come true."

"I just can't believe it," Leila said, staring dazedly into her cup of tea. "I mean, not that I don't like you, Harry, but it feels as if someone just died or something. The Harry I grew up with was just a bloody faker, and all this time I thought he was a real person..." She buried her face in her hands and Harry patted her arm helplessly.

Hermione squeezed Leila's hand. "Don't feel too bad, Leila. You got to know the real Harry. Isn't he better than the old one?"

Leila smiled sadly. "He is, but it's not the same. Especially since he'll be...you know...gone in a few days."

Harry glanced down at his soup. Hermione stared pointedly out the wide bay windows at the end of the hall, and Leila twisted a piece of her hair.

Desperate for another topic, Harry looked around the dining hall and suddenly realized that it was more empty than it had been at dinner the day before. "Where'd all the students go?" he asked, puzzled.

Hermione smiled. "Harry, do you know what's happening in three days?"

Harry looked over at Leila. She shrugged. "Beats me. What?"

“Christmas!” Hermione said gleefully. “Didn’t you notice the decorations that have been going up?”

“Decorations?” Harry said incredulously. “What decorations?”

“The garlands on the banisters, the candles in the windowsills, the snowflakes floating above our heads...”

“Hermione, the garlands were *purple!*”

“They were garlands, nonetheless!”

Leila smacked her head. “It’s almost Christmas! How could I have forgotten? So all the students have gone home for break?”

Hermione nodded. “We have the Winter Ball and other celebrations after they get back. It’s colder in January, anyway. Feels more like Christmastime.”

Harry looked over at Leila. “I don’t have a gift for you.”

She shrugged. “Really, Harry, I don’t care. I know the Death Eaters didn’t exactly let you and Lupin out to do your holiday shopping. It’s enough for me just to have you alive.”

Christmas Eve dawned bright and clear. It had gotten a little colder in the past few days, but Harry wasn’t very optimistic about getting snow for Christmas. Nevertheless, he pulled his cloak and scarf out of his trunk, just in case.

He and Leila were in the library. She had insisted on looking for the missing rune in some of the oldest volumes. Harry humored her, although he thought it was a waste of time; what did either of them know of the Aperio, or Ancient Runes for that matter?

Leila had just buried her nose in book when the doors to the library burst open and Hermione ran in. She was waving a piece of paper and babbling incomprehensively.

“Hermione!” Harry exclaimed, alarmed. “Are you alright?”

Leila grabbed Hermione's shoulder as the girl struggled to complete a sentence. "...I found it," she finally panted. "I found it!"

"Found what?" Leila asked, then her eyes widened. "Oooooohhhh! You found it!"

"The rune?" Harry said, though he already knew the answer.

Hermione nodded.

Harry sank back into the chair, dazed. Leila's face had gone white, and Harry knew that the full magnitude of Hermione's discovery was crashing down on his sister. Now they had the full equation. Now Flamel and Hermione could come up with a spell. Now they could go back.

And his sister would be left here, alone.

"Oh, Leila," Harry muttered.

But Leila had squared her shoulders and set her jaw. "That's wonderful, Hermione," she said, and Harry could only make out the slightest quaver in her voice. "What was the missing rune?"

"It's the triquetra," Hermione said, bobbing up and down, her face flushed with excitement. "The symbol of unity; the symbol of three. It's three triangles that are connected. Here, I'll draw it for you."

She spread the piece of paper on the table and quickly drew three lines. They connected in three center intersections and three outer points, forming a never-ending pathway. "Don't you see?" she said excitedly. "It's the symbol of three. It's the symbol of *you!*"

"Bloody hell," Harry said quietly, feeling that now was the fitting time to use Ron's favorite phrase. "Hermione, this is incredible. Have you shown Flamel?"

She shook her head. "I came to show you first."

"We've got to go tell him," Leila said. "Now! We can't wait; this is too important."

The three dashed out of the library and up the flight of stairs that led to the second floor. It wasn't long before they reached Flamel's office, panting breathlessly. Harry knocked, and a second later someone called, "Come in!"

The three burst through the door. "Sir, Hermione's found the missing rune," Harry blurted out.

Flamel's eyes widened and he quickly set down his tea. "She did? Marvelous, Miss Granger! Which rune was it?"

"Triqueta," Hermione said, unfolding the paper. "See? The never-ending symbol of unity."

Flamel pulled his spectacles down onto his nose and studied the crude picture. "Amazing," he murmured. "Triqueta, a symbol commonly used in Christianity as well as Celtic folklore. The Christians used it to symbolize the trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and its unity and equality. If I remember correctly, the some Celts used it to symbolize the Goddess, and others, the god Odin. Odin was the god of wisdom, war, battle, and death. Very fitting... Hmm...."

The three waited uneasily as Flamel leaned over the paper. Finally he looked up. "You've found it, Miss Granger. Excellent work."

Hermione blushed and beamed.

"Now, if only we could summon the Headmistress and tell her the good news..."

At that moment, Madame Maxime burst through the door, wringing her hands.

"Marvelous!" Flamel cried happily, clapping his hands together. "Perfect timing!"

"No, no, you don't understand," the Headmistress cried. "The Death Eaters are surrounding Beauxbatons!"

Author's Note: OK, I lied. Next chapter the Aperio will be reversed. I was sitting in church this morning and suddenly the trinity symbol popped into my head. I quickly sketched it onto a scrap of paper and rushed back to my room to write the idea down before I forgot it.

News Alert! If you like this story, I've started a new one. It's called *All that Remains* and explores the idea of late-blooming magic in a certain Muggle-raised girl named Libby. Set in Harry's fifth year at Hogwarts. Five chapters are posted, so please go read it and review! Thanks a million. Love you guys!

Chapter 52

Five minutes later, everyone was assembled in Madame Maxime's office. Each individual had reacted differently to the news of Death Eaters in France. Hermione was biting her nails nervously as she and a very calm Flamel poured over parchments of runes and incantations. Lupin was pacing nervously back and forth, and Leila was sitting very still in her chair, her eyes wide with fear. Snape and the Headmistress were arguing.

"You said we'd be safe here!" the former Potions master accused.

"I didn't think they'd guess where you were," she cried, wringing her hands. "Someone on your end must 'ave informed ze Death Eaters where you were, because I certainly did not!"

"The only person who knew on our end was Minerva McGonagall, and I would trust her with my life," Snape growled.

"Zat was obviously an unwise decision on your part," Madame Maxime snapped. "I have granted hospitality to you at the risk of my students' lives, and this is 'ow you repay me? By accusing me of not doing everything in my power to 'elp and protect you?"

"You told us that Beauxbatons was the safest place in Europe!"

"If you don't feel safe 'ere, zen you can just leave!"

"And go where?" Snape scoffed. "The anti-portkey and anti-apparation wards are already in place. The Floo network has been cut off. We are trapped, and it's your fault..."

"The wards are as strong as I can make them without help," Madame Maxime said angrily, glancing over at Flamel.

Lupin stopped his pacing and threw up his hands. "Please! Maxime, Severus, we are adults! No matter how much you two fight it still doesn't change the fact that the Death Eaters are here, and unless the wards are strengthened, we're going to be fighting for our lives

against unbeatable odds in a few hours. And we still don't know how the Death Eaters found us..."

"It's evident, isn't it?" Madame Maxime huffed.

"Yes, it's evident that *you* were the leak!" Snape spat.

Suddenly Harry was struck with an idea. "There's only one way to find out for sure," he interjected quickly. Both Snape and Madame Maxime turned to look at him.

"Hermione," Harry called, and she looked up with from the intricate plans she and Flamel were engrossed in. "How did the Death Eaters find out where we were?"

Confusion fled across her face. "It's obvious, isn't it?" Hermione said, brushing a stray piece of hair away from her face. "They must have suspected that you'd try to leave the country. They must have been watching all the outgoing international Portkeys through the Ministry of Magic."

There was a moment of shocked silence. Then Lupin sank into the nearest chair. "The girl's right. Dear god, what have we done? Maxime, we've practically put the death sentence on you and your students!" Lupin buried his face in his hands.

Madame Maxime's demeanor instantly softened. "Oh, Remus, do not blame yourself! 'Ow could you 'ave known?"

"But we've doomed you all."

The Headmistress placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Not necessarily. We'll get through zis somehow, don't you worry. Zere are only about twenty students remaining 'ere over Christmas holidays, and we 'ave safe rooms under the castle zat ze students can stay in. Ze Détenteurs—zey are the French Aurors—will help defend ze school, but ze Death Eaters outnumber them and us. Of course, it'd be easier if..." She trailed off and glanced over at Flamel, and Harry followed her gaze, curious. Flamel and Hermione were back at work, arguing over a certain incantation. Maxime lowered her voice. "It'd be easier if Nicholas would help, but 'e insists on remaining completely

neutral. Claims it isn't fair for 'im to take sides, especially when he 'as six hundred years more experience than them."

"What?" Harry exclaimed. Lupin's mouth was moving angrily, but no words were coming out.

Madame Maxime looked surprised. "You didn't know? I thought everyone knew."

"You'll have to forgive us, but in our world Flamel wasn't even alive," Lupin said tightly. "Now what is this about him not taking sides?"

The Headmistress glanced once more in Flamel's direction. "Nicholas is a wonderful old man, but 'e refuses to take sides—ever. 'E is a marvelous dueller and has a much more powerful magical core than anyone else alive today. 'Eis more powerful than Dumbledore ever was, and more powerful than Voldemort will ever become. 'E has spent his whole life gaining more knowledge; hence, 'e knows about every spell ever invented and also 'as an endless supply of spells 'e created himself. Because of zis, 'e feels that it is wrong for him to pick a side when wars like the current one come up. He will train anyone who comes to him for knowledge, 'e will support the light wizards and witches in their fight, but 'e will not join in active combat or defense."

Lupin was sputtering angrily. Harry looked over at Leila, but she didn't look surprised. "You *knew*?"

She shrugged. "Everyone knows, Harry. It's common knowledge back at home."

Harry turned back to the Headmistress. "So he will sit here and reverse our Aperio, but won't even help you defend the castle from the Death Eaters outside."

Madame Maxime's shoulders slumped. "Actually, I still don't know why 'e agreed to 'elp you reverse your Aperio. Maybe 'e felt that 'e was paying his final respects to Dumbledore by 'elping you. Maybe he feels guilty that Dumbledore died confronting the man he would not face himself. I do not know. What I do know is zat if 'e wanted, 'e could keep my school safe, but 'e will not."

Lupin rose from his chair, his face a mask of fury. "Flamel!"

The white-bearded man looked up from his parchments. "Yes?"

"I must speak with you now, sir. It is urgent."

A knowing expression spread across the older man's face, but he dipped his head in compliance and followed Lupin out the door into the corridor.

Madame Maxime sank wearily into the chair and rubbed her temples. "It will do no good," she sighed.

Snape looked at her sharply. "What makes you say that?"

The large woman signed disparagingly. "Do you think zat in six hundred years people 'ave not tried? I 'ave begged Nicholas to see reason, but 'e is set in his ways. He would not even help Dumbledore defeat Grindewald."

"Your Mr. Flamel hasn't yet encountered Remus Lupin," Snape muttered.

Harry silently agreed. Remus Lupin could be very convincing—especially the Lupin from the other world.

Suddenly Maxime burst into tears. "It is no use! It will take ze Death Eaters no more than four hours to enter ze school, and there is nothing more I can do!"

"Where are your students now?" Snape inquired.

"My staff have taken them to the safe rooms under the school," Maxime said, "but if the school falls, it will only be a matter of time before the safe rooms are taken as well."

She would have continued, but Snape cut in. "What kind of wards do you have around the school?"

The Headmistress told him, using a lot of terms Harry had never heard before. "But even those wards are no good," Maxime finished,

tears welling up in her eyes again. “Ogwarts’s wards were better than Beauxbatons’s, and ze Death Eaters broke through those easily!”

Snape was scowling at the ground, but by now Harry knew that this meant the Potions Master was simply thinking. “Have you thought of using Inhibitory Blockade Spells?” Snape asked.

Madame Maxime shook her head. “What is zat?”

“I may be able to help you with the wards,” Snape growled. “In the other reality, I helped Dumbledore with the wards at Hogwarts, and we might have used spells that the Death Eaters don’t know about in this world.”

The Headmistress’s face brightened. “Really? Do you think zat would work?”

“Right now, you don’t have any other choice, do you?” Snape said sarcastically.

She frowned. “I suppose you’re right. It’s worth a try, anyway! Come, I’ll take you to ze central ward core.”

Snape wordlessly followed her out the door, but he wore a slightly smug look. As the door swung open, Harry caught a strain of Lupin’s raised voice. “...a coward, Nicholas! That’s all you are...” Then the door slammed, and there was silence in the room.

Harry looked over at Leila. She was twisting her hair anxiously and biting her lip. “Are you alright?” he said in a low voice.

She nodded, not meeting his eyes.

Hermione suddenly laid down her quill and began blowing on a piece of parchment. “I think I’ve got the spell,” she announced, then glanced up and seemed to realize that the room was mostly empty. “Where’d they all go?” Hermione asked, looking confused.

“Lupin is trying to convince Flamel that he should join in the fight, and Snape is helping the Headmistress strengthen the wards.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking a little put out. “Well, I’ll have to have Professor Flamel look over my work when he returns, but I’m pretty sure I’ve got the right incantations and rituals.”

“How long will it take?”

She thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. It could be a half an hour, it could be two days. We’ve got quite a few spells to do.”

“So,” Leila said, sitting up. “So they could be gone...forever...in less than an hour.”

Hermione nodded sympathetically. “Yes, they could.”

Leila swallowed hard. “Then I’d better say my goodbyes, huh?”

The older girl nodded once again, then went back to the desk and thoughtfully buried her face a large dusty book.

Leila turned to Harry. He watched her carefully, afraid that if he let it sink in that he would never see her again, he might lose control. *Merlin, that girl means a lot to me.*

“Harry,” Leila said softly, her voice only quivering slightly. “I...I really don’t know what to say. I just...Oh gosh, this really sucks.”

“I know,” Harry muttered, and a moment later, his sister had thrown her arms around him.

Harry hugged her back, closing his eyes and willing the tears to remain unshed. “Leila, I’m sorry for being such a prat...you know, about Theodore.”

She pulled away and looked up at him. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“But I do,” Harry said, pressing on. “I was a right git. And...and I’m sorry about Mum and Dad. If I hadn’t...”

“No!” Leila cried. “No, I will not allow you to blame yourself about them!”

“But it’s my fault! If I hadn’t told the Order about the Horcruxes...”

“Harry, it is not your fault!” Leila said fiercely. “If you blame yourself one more time, I swear on Merlin’s grave I’ll hex you.”

Harry managed a half grin. “Playing dirty, huh?”

She leaned back in her chair, a small smile tugging at the corners of her face. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

“Most girls would pay half the galleons in Grinotts to be rid of their older brothers.”

“Most girls aren’t lucky like you,” Harry said, keeping a straight face.

She gave him a stern glance. “A year ago, I might have considered the offer. You know, paying the galleons to be rid of you.”

“Was I that bad?” Harry asked, alarmed.

Leila giggled. “Gottcha.”

Harry swatted at her, but she slid away. “Now, now. Is that the last impression you want me to have of you? Beating on me like any normal brother?”

Harry looked down. “Maybe if I hadn’t been so nice, you wouldn’t miss me so much when I leave.”

“No, Harry.” Leila reached over and turned his face towards her. “I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Harry met her eyes. “Thanks,” he whispered.

The door opened, and Harry and Leila both turned to see who had entered. It was Madame Maxime and Snape. Harry could still hear Lupin’s voice filtering in from the hallway. “....Dumbledore...do you really think...”

The door shut, and Madame Maxime plopped down in a chair. “Lupin will never convince him.”

Snape said nothing.

Hermione cleared her throat nervously. "Um, I think I've created the right incantation."

Both instantly stiffened. "You 'ave?" Madame Maxime said skeptically. "Are you sure..."

"I'm sure," Hermione said firmly, her jaw set.

The Headmistress opened her mouth, probably to protest, but Harry jumped in first. "So, how are the wards, Madame Maxime?"

Hermione shot him a grateful glance. "Oh, ze wards are very strong now. Severus 'ere is simply marvelous with ze wand!" Maxime gushed.

Snape scowled even harder at the praise. "I told you, Maxime, the spells were ones Dumbledore taught me!"

"But you remembered them," Maxime said happily, as if that made all the difference.

"How long will the wards last now against the Death Eaters?" Leila inquired.

Maxime and Snape exchanged glances. "I'm guessing about forty-eight hours," she said. "Long enough for us to reverse ze Aperio, anyway. Of course, it will take less time if you really do have the right spell," she finished skeptically.

Hermione flushed red. "I assure you, Madame Maxime, that my spell is..."

The doors opened, and Hermione stopped mid-sentence. Lupin strode in, a satisfied expression on his face; Flamel followed, looking subdued.

No one spoke for the longest time. Harry was dying to know whether Lupin had made any headway with the stubborn old man, but didn't dare to ask the question that everyone was thinking.

“Professor?” Hermione said timidly, finally breaking the silence. “Professor, would you come and look at this? I think I’ve completed the incantation.”

Flamel seemed to wake from a trance. “Certainly, my dear,” he said, and quickly joined Hermione at the desk.

Lupin sank into the chair next to Harry. Madame Maxime was staring open-mouthed at the werewolf. Lupin met her gaze, then gave a pronounced nod. Across the room, Snape was smirking.

“What did you say to him?” Harry hissed, unable to suppress his curiosity any longer.

“What we discussed is confidential,” Lupin said quietly. “But I do not doubt that now he will have no qualms in joining our side.”

Harry exchanged incredulous glances with Leila, who let out a sigh of relief. “Maybe we’ll have a chance at winning the war now,” she said.

Madame Maxime’s mouth was still open. She shook her head angrily. “Nicholas! Does this mean you will help me keep ze students safe now? You will fight against ze Death Eaters?”

Flamel turned slowly from the desk to meet her gaze. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence. Then he nodded. “Yes, I will help.”

If possible, the Headmistress’s mouth opened even wider. Then she sank into a chair as tears filled her eyes. “Good lord,” she whispered, and then began to murmur things in French, all the while dabbing at the tears with an enormous handkerchief. Harry caught a few words—he had picked up a little French while at Beaubaxtons, after all. The Headmistress was saying, “Mes étudiants... mes étudiants seront sûrs...” *My students, my students will be safe.*

Flamel turned back to the desk, but a moment later he was facing the little group. “The spell is completed,” he said. “But as I am not sure exactly how long it will take to complete the different components, we should start immediately. Right now.”

Snape, Harry, and Lupin all looked at each other. “Tell us what to do,” Lupin said quietly.

And Flamel did. They first had to undergo spells that truly completed the partial Aperio bonds between the three participants. “Put aside your differences in your minds,” Flamel said as Hermione muttered long strings of incantations under her breath. “One in mind, body, and spirit.”

As Hermione finished the last incantation, Harry felt a warm glow spread throughout his body. Opening his eyes, he saw the last thread of golden light connecting him and Lupin and Snape disappear into thin air.

Flamel sighed. “The first step completed, we must now move into the second and most complex step. The triqueta rune is important because it is the very core of the magic of the Aperio. The rune must be drawn on the floor, painted with a special potion made of eighty-seven separate ingredients. Then we can begin the last part of the reversal—the Sending Stage. You each will stand in one of the triqueta’s triangles, and touch wands over the middle ground as Hermione and I create a magical field around you with layers of complex spells. These spells will hopefully eventually become so strong that you will literally be pulled out of this world and into your own.”

Harry nodded nervously, and Leila squeezed his arm. “It will be OK, I promise,” she whispered. “Flamel and Hermione know what they’re doing.”

“No, they don’t,” Harry argued. “They don’t know what they’re doing, and that’s what worries me! They’ve never reversed an Aperio before. How do they know they’re not going to kill us in the last step?”

“You’ll just have to trust them. Think, Harry. Has Hermione ever been wrong?”

“Uh....” He could only think of one time off the top of his mind—the time in the Shrieking Shack when Hermione had guessed that Lupin was letting Sirius into the castle and Sirius wanted Harry dead. But

everyone had thought that. That time didn't really count. He shook his head shamefacedly.

"See? Trust them, Harry."

It took three hours for Flamel, Hermione, and Snape to brew the potion. Both Flamel and Hermione were quite impressed with Snape's potions skills, and by the way the Potions Master was scowling, Harry was sure Snape was a bit embarrassed by their praise. Finally, the solution was done, and the wooden floor had been cleared.

"Are you sure we should do it here?" Hermione said nervously. Flamel looked up.

"Why not, Miss Granger?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I think the spells would work better if the rune was drawn on a marble floor, Professor."

Flamel frowned. "But wood has more magical properties," he said.

"True," Hermione admitted, looking very shy. "But...sir... I read somewhere that in complex spells, wood has more of a tendency to absorb some of the magic. In this particular set of incantations, we need all the magic to stay in the triquetra field, since the threshold is high for activating a reversal of an Aperio. Marble doesn't absorb magic nearly as much as wood, so I was thinking it might be better."

Flamel looked at her for a very long time. "You are correct," he finally said, looking a little taken aback that a seventeen-year-old Muggleborn witch had just bested him. "We will move to the ball room."

Leila disappeared for a few minutes as they were making their way down to the ball room. When she finally reappeared in the marble-floored room, she was panting slightly and clutching something in her hands. "Here, Harry," she said, thrusting a small bundle of something at him. "Take these."

“What is it?” Harry asked. He looked down and found himself looking at a dozen of the best pictures from the photo album Leila had shown him when they’d first arrived at Beauxbatons. There were family pictures, single shots, and even the most recent picture of everyone smiling at his seventeenth birthday party.

Harry looked up at his sister. “Leila...”

“I want you to have them,” she said, swallowing hard. “So...so you don’t forget.”

Harry pocketed the pictures. “I won’t forget, ever,” he promised softly.

Flamel and Hermione had finished drawing a perfect triqueta on the marble floor. “We are ready,” Flamel called, and Harry went to stand next to Lupin on the perimeter of the rune. “Each of you step into a triangle,” Flamel instructed. “Then hold your wands out over the center portion.”

Harry held out his wand and felt a little jolt of electricity as it touched the ends of Snape’s and Lupin’s wands. “Remember what you were wishing on the night the Aperio took place,” Flamel said softly. “It is that wish that binds you three together; it is that thought that can return you to your world.” He pulled out his wand and begun to mutter spells under his breath.

Harry looked over at his sister one last time. It felt as if a piece of his heart was being ripped out and kept here in this world—he had been given a family, and now the last remaining member was being taken away from him.

Leila had seemed so calm about the whole situation, but when Harry looked at her now, she seemed to be fighting an internal battle. “Concentrate on the reversal process,” Flamel said sharply, and Harry turned back to the center of the triqueta.

But a second later, he was being crushed in a hug. Harry pulled out of the connection and turned to find Leila sobbing uncontrollably into his chest.

“Leila?”

She wasn't stopping. If anything, her sobs were becoming louder. Harry fought to suppress the tears in his own eyes. "Leila!"

Leila finally looked up, tears streaming down her face and dripping off her chin. "Oh god, Harry. I thought I could do it. I thought I could let you leave like this, but I can't! I just can't do it. You're....you're all I've got left." She buried her head in his chest once again.

"Oh Leila," Harry whispered, holding her close and stroking her hair.

Over her shoulder, he could see the shocked and frustrated faces of Lupin, Snape, and Madame Maxime. Flamel was watching the scene with a stoic face, but Hermione looked as if she was fighting back tears.

And suddenly, Harry didn't care any more. He didn't care what they thought; he didn't care that the Death Eaters were surrounding the school, or that they couldn't stay in this world for much longer. All he cared about was finding a way to stay with Leila.

He met Hermione's eyes over Leila's head. "Is there a way?" he asked quietly.

Hermione bit her lip. "It's never been done before...Oh, what am I saying? Reversing an Aperio has only been done once. Harry, I don't know... Nothing I've read has come out and stated that it was completely impossible. It would be risky, though."

"I'll take any risks."

"What are you talking about?" Madame Maxime interjected angrily. "We 'ave no time for this! You must leave now."

"Harry, she's right..." Lupin began.

"No," Harry said.

"No?" Lupin repeated, looking confused.

"No," Harry said again. "No, I'm not going. Not if it means leaving Leila here alone."

Lupin's jaw dropped, and he began to sputter incomprehensibly. "But...but...you...the Aperio..."

"Stupid, idiotic boy," Snape spat, shooting daggers at Harry with his eyes. "You will put your silly family ties before the fate of both worlds? How very noble of you."

"Surely you do not mean what you 'ave said," Maxime said, wringing her hands. "Harry, I implore you to listen to reason!"

"No," Harry said again. Suddenly his mind felt very clear. He glared at the three adults surrounding him. Leila had untangled herself from the embrace, but Harry still kept one protective arm around her shoulder. "No, I can't go. Not if it means leaving Leila. Do you want to know why? Here's why. If I have to leave the only family I've ever really known behind in this godforsaken world, I won't even have the desire to reverse the Aperio, and none of your silly spells and runes and incantations will work after all."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

"The boy's right," Flamel said quietly. "None of our spells will be able to pull him back into his own world if he is unwilling to go."

After another stunned moment, Snape began to swear under his breath. Lupin's face turned very red, and Madame Maxime began to ramble in long strings of French.

Harry didn't care. He turned back to Hermione. "How?" he said.

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "If...if Leila were to go back with you, she would of course encounter problems because there is no 'Leila' in your world. If we were to send her along with you normally, she would die the instant she arrived in the other reality. But that can be remedied. There is an ancient spell that binds two people's life forces together. If you were willing, the spell could bind you and your sister together. In your world, she would be living off of your life force."

"Wait," Harry said, frowning. "She'd be living off of my life force? What does that mean?"

Hermione sighed. "You would feel no side effects or magical draining because of the binding, but were you ever to die, she would instantly die too."

"Absolutely not," Harry said, horrified.

"Finally a rational decision," Maxime said loudly. "Now, if we can continue..."

"I'll do it," Leila said suddenly.

"Leila!"

"Harry," she said, her voice dangerously low. "Don't you get it? *I don't want to live without you*. I'll do anything—even if that means being dependant on your life force." She sighed dramatically. "Of course, that would make for some excellent bribery on your side of things..."

Harry managed a small smile. "Leila, you don't understand. I've got to go up against Voldemort. I can't even promise you I'll live to be eighteen!"

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "How many times must I say it? Harry, I DON'T CARE. I don't think I'll ever be happy without you and Mum and Dad. A month in your world is better than the rest of my life here."

"Leila..."

"How many times must I say it, Harry?" she said, exasperated. "I have nothing left here. Nothing."

Harry met her eyes. "You're sure?" he said softly.

Leila nodded. "I'm sure."

He turned back to Hermione. "What do we do?"

"Harry," Lupin began, but one look silenced the werewolf.

"First I should warn you that cross-reality travel is extremely hard, even for people who have lived in both realities at one point of time. Leila, I don't know what will happen to you when the Aperio is

reversed, only that it will most likely be unpleasant. When you arrive, you will most likely need a few weeks to regain your strength. Is that clear?"

Leila nodded.

Hermione pulled a large dusty book from the stack of books she'd brought from Flamel's office. "The ancient spell is here," she said. "Conjure up two small knives and a small silver bowl."

Harry quickly conjured up the required items while Hermione flipped through the book. The others watched, but no one tried to interfere.

Hermione read the instructions to herself. "OK," she said, biting her lip. "You've got to put a little of your blood in the basin."

Harry quickly sliced his forearm and let the blood drain into the bowl. Leila took a little more time, obviously uncomfortable with the whole cutting part. "Just don't think about it," Harry encouraged her, and finally she was able to make a small slice in her right forearm.

"Now press your forearms together," Hermione instructed, and they did. Harry tried not to think about the excess blood running down his arm and soaking into his sleeve.

Hermione closed her eyes and began chanting a spell. The silver bowl began to smoke, and the red smoke surrounded the brother and sister. It was the strangest sensation Harry had ever experienced. It was almost as if a part of him had floated up to the ceiling and was observing the ritual from above. Then another part of him was still standing there, ignoring the searing pain in his arm, and trying not to cough from the red smoke. As Hermione finished her incantation, a red light shot out of the end of her wand and wound its way around the siblings. Harry suddenly felt as if something was pulling in his chest. He gasped and held his stomach with his free hand. Leila was gasping as well, looking as if she'd just been socked in the stomach.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pain was gone. He could breathe again, and his forearm didn't hurt any more. Harry examined it, and to his surprise, the cut was healed, with only a thin white line showing where the dagger had cut his skin.

“Are you alright?”

Leila looked up from examining her own arm. “I’m fine,” she said. “What just happened?”

“You are now dependent on Harry’s life force,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, so don’t ever try to murder me. It might not be good for your health,” Harry joked, and Leila smiled.

The three teenagers turned back to the adults.

“If you’re finished, we have an *Aperio* to reverse,” Lupin said tightly.

Harry was in his position again, except that this time, Leila was standing in his triangle as well. “Hold on tight,” he muttered, and she wrapped her arms securely around his waist.

Harry touched wands with Lupin and Snape again, and then turned to look at Hermione one last time. “Thank you,” he said. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

She smiled sadly. “It was nice meeting you, Harry. I hope all goes well for you in your world.”

Flamel lightly touched her shoulder. “Are you ready?”

Hermione took one last long look at Harry and Leila, then nodded.

“Then let’s not put this off any longer,” Flamel said.

He and Hermione began to erect the layers of magic again. As each set of incantations was completed, a new color of light would surround the four in the triqueta. The magic swirled around them, giving him a lightheaded feeling. The light pulsed and moved, forming a sphere nearly twelve feet high. Finally, when Harry was sure that no more magical walls would fit around them, Hermione and Flamel raised their wands and said at the same time, “*Priori novo fatumetas!*”

Instantly, Harry's world was plunged into darkness as he felt a burning, squeezing, spinning sensation. He felt as if he was trying to Apparate, take a Portkey, and Floo at the same time. Leila's arms tightened around him, and she uttered a soft scream.

"Hang on tight," Lupin shouted from the other side of the circle. "The wands are keeping us together! The connection must not break!"

Harry gritted his teeth and pushed. He could feel the magic trying to tear him away from Lupin and Snape, but he resisted, and forced the connection to stay strong.

The spinning sensation was replaced with a jolting, bumpy feeling. Harry tried to imagine that he was just on the Knight Bus, and that the feeling would go away soon, but it didn't help.

Then there was a huge pressure, kind of like being run over by the Knight Bus. He could hardly breathe—and what was worse, Leila's arms were relaxing—she was losing her grip...

Harry tightened his hold on her and pulled with all his might. *Please help this to end quickly!*

The darkness disappeared, and now they were spinning through a world with bright flashes. It was almost like being in a cloud during a lightning storm.

"One more jolt," Lupin yelled. "Hang on..."

Harry held on with all his might. There was a mighty bump, and then he was falling...falling...falling...

"Umph." He hit the ground with a mighty impact that knocked the breath out of him. Harry was vaguely aware of the fact that there was something soft and cold falling on his face as he gasped for air. The world was spinning, but soon the rotations got slower and slower.

He sat up and looked around. Everything was dark, and Harry fumbled around for his wand, and he finally found it next to him buried in a large pile of cold fluffy stuff. "Lumos," Harry whispered, and

instantly the scene around him was lit by the eerie yellow glow of his wand.

He seemed to have landed in a small snow drift. A few feet away, Snape was slowly getting to his feet, brushing snow off his robes. Lupin seemed to be having a harder time of it. Harry quickly turned back to Leila. She was lying still in the snow.

“Oh Merlin,” Harry muttered. He quickly bent over her, but she seemed to be breathing. “Leila? Leila, can you hear me?”

There was no response. “She’s unconscious,” Snape said from behind him.

“I can see that,” Harry snapped. “How do I do a Feather-Light charm?”

“I can see you’re even duller than I gave you credit for,” Snape muttered, but he cast the spell on Leila, and Harry quickly picked her up.

Lupin was finally standing. He shivered in the cold night air. “Where are we?”

“No idea,” Harry said, looking around. From the wand-light and the sliver of moon, he could see a wide field that ended at a dark line of trees. “Oh, look,” Harry said, pointing to the right of the field. “I see lights in the distance. Do you think it’s a village?”

“It’s worth a try,” Lupin said doubtfully. “But how do we know we’re really back? What if we were just transported to Britain? Or even worse, if we’ve ended up in another reality?”

They all looked at each other. “There’s the predicament,” Snape muttered. “How to find out whether we’re in our own world or not.”

Suddenly Harry had to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from crying out. A sharp, burning pain had just shot through his forehead—a pain he hadn’t felt in months.

“Harry?” Lupin’s pale face was illuminated in the darkness. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

“We’re back,” Harry said, gritting his teeth against the pain in his scar. “We’re back—and Voldemort knows.”

Author’s Note: Well, here it is. Forgive any errors—it’s two-thirty in the morning and I’ve been up since seven yesterday morning. But I’m sure all you writers out there can understand that sometimes you just get this urge—this inspiration—and you *have* to write or it will go away. Yeah, that’s what I got tonight. This chapter’s the longest yet. I thought of splitting it up, but I really couldn’t find a good splitting place, so I’ll post it all at once.

So there you go. Hope you were happy with the final decision—I always planned for Harry to reverse the Aperio and take his sister with him. As for Sirius and Ginny—Sirius will be happier in the other world with his brother. He likes a dangerous life, and in the other world, he’d have to go into hiding for a crime he didn’t commit in either world. Ginny will be where she needs to be—with her family. When they move to America, she’ll be able to reconnect with her parents and siblings, which is exactly what she needs to really get over her Azkaban experience. Leila—well, obviously, I couldn’t leave her in the other world all alone, could I? That’d just be cruel.

At the end of the story I will post an epilogue that tells what became of all the characters I left in the Aperio reality, including Sirius, Regulus, Jeremy, Ginny, the Weasleys, Hermione, Flamel, Beauxbatons, Voldemort, the Death Eaters...etc. Don’t worry too much... I don’t plan on killing any one else off (except for some evil people we don’t really care about). Lily and James were enough. And you guys don’t know how lucky you are that I ended up keeping Sirius around—originally I was going to kill him off at the Battle of Hogwarts to eliminate another of Harry’s reasons for staying in that world, but I decided that I just couldn’t do it—not after shedding so many tears over Lily and James (even after they were dead in the original world!).

Sorry about this atrociously long author’s note, but I have one more thing I’d like to say. If any of you have SIYE accounts, head over there and vote for The World as We Knew It in the September

Dumbledore's Silver Trinket Award Polls. Just log in, go to home page, and click on VOTE HERE. Oh, and my username over there is the same as here—GinnyP0tter.

The next chapter will be a few weeks away. I'll probably have to wait for break before I can post again here. I'm SOOOOO busy here at college. Anyway, if you're bored, I've got eight chapters posted of "All That Remains," a new story I've started. Go check it out!

Chapter 53

Harry let Leila slip back onto the snow, and bent over, trying to fight the pain in his scar, trying to fight Voldemort out of his head, but he didn't know how...he had never learned Occlumency...

Around him, the scene was surreal; the snow drifted silently to the ground, lit up by Lupin's and Snape's wands. His own wand had fallen, forgotten, to the ground. He could think of nothing else but the searing, burning, slicing pain that was rolling over him in waves... His vision was fading in and out, and he fought to keep his last meal in his stomach.

But suddenly Snape was there, gripping his shoulders, shouting in his ear. "Concentrate, Potter, concentrate! Build a wall in your mind!"

Harry tried to concentrate, tried to listen, but now the insane laughter was starting up in his head again—Voldemort was happy, deliriously happy. Harry felt himself growing horrifyingly exulted, as the feelings of intense delight washed over him.

"Dammit, Potter, listen to me!" Snape shouted. "Block him out! Push him out of your mind! Idiot boy, do as I say!"

But Harry couldn't. He could do nothing against the horrible pain, against the presence of the man he hated most in his mind. He felt the blackness closing in as he slumped over in pain.

There was a sharp pain as a hand came crashing down on his face. For a moment, Harry was jerked back by the stinging slap. It was enough.

Snape grabbed his head and forced him to look into his eyes. Instantly, Harry could feel another presence in his mind. Then the pain began again, as the two presences collided. A battle was being fought in his mind. Voldemort was struggling, maintaining his own, but Severus Snape was there too, fighting the Dark Lord out. The two forces struggled, pushing back and forth, each gaining a little ground, then losing a little.

Harry was in agony. It felt as if his head was splitting open. He'd take the Cruciatus any day over this... Would it never end?

Then, with a mighty push, Snape expelled Voldemort from Harry's mind.

The Potions Master staggered back, panting. Harry's knees buckled, and he fell to the ground, shaking. But the pain was gone. His scar still burned a little, but it was nothing compared to when Voldemort was in his head.

"Severus...Severus! Are you alright?"

Lupin was leaning toward Snape, his wand lighting up his worried face. "Severus?"

"I'm fine," Snape growled, pushing Lupin away, and the werewolf turned to Harry.

"Harry?"

"I'm good," Harry was able to say. "I...I couldn't...Voldemort..."

"If you'd been listening in Occlumency lessons," Snape began, but Harry slowly pushed himself to his feet and held out a hand.

"I know. I should have listened." It hurt to admit it, but it was the truth; although Snape hadn't been the ideal teacher, Harry should have tried harder to learn. He should have practiced clearing his mind, at least, but he hadn't. And now, when he needed Occlumency more than ever before...

Harry shivered. "Do you want a warming charm...?" Lupin began, but at that moment, Snape hissed in pain and clutched his left forearm.

Harry's scar burned, and he got a glimpse of Voldemort summoning his followers. "They're all coming," he grated out. "They're all looking for us now. For me, anyway."

"We need to get to shelter," Lupin rasped. "Now." He took a few steps, then staggered.

"Can you apparate?" Snape asked through gritted teeth. "Of course you can't apparate," he muttered. "Not in the condition you're in. You either, Potter?"

Harry shook his head. He was too dizzy... He'd end up splinching himself, for sure.

"The Aurors will be looking for us too," Snape muttered, more to himself than the rest of the group. "The best bet we have is to make it to that town," he said, a little louder this time. "From there, we can find shelter, at least, and then decide who to contact."

"Severus, you need to go," Lupin said, and Harry stared at him.

"Why?"

"If Severus makes it back to Voldemort and can convince him that he's still loyal, he can help us," Lupin explained patiently. "Have you thought about how you're to destroy Nagini without inside help, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He had had the feeling that Snape would have to return to Death Eater ranks, but he hadn't given it much thought at Beauxbatons.

"Stupid Gryffindors," Snape hissed. "You never plan ahead...you just charge foolishly into battle without thinking about the future."

"Go now," Lupin said. "The sooner the better."

"No."

Lupin looked incredulous. "No?"

"No. I'm not leaving you here alone with an unconscious trans-reality girl and the Boy-Who-Lived who's right now the Boy-Who-Can-Hardly-Stand."

Harry managed a half grin.

“If you stay here, you’ll either freeze or the Death Eaters or Aurors will find you. You’ve got to get to safety.”

Fortunately, Lupin was level-headed enough not to argue. Warming charms were performed all around, and the odd group set off across the field. Harry draped the now-light Leila over his back, and Snape supported Lupin’s elbow, although the werewolf swore up and down he could make it without assistance.

The going was slow. Leila may not have weighed anything at all, but Harry was still having a hard time walking. The battle in his mind had drained him of any energy he’d had left over after the Aperio reversal. Lupin wasn’t doing any better; he kept stumbling, and he was leaning more and more on Snape now as the lights slowly got brighter in the distance.

The snow was a foot deep, which made the going even harder. Harry was breathing hard, but every breath felt as if knives were piercing his chest. Even with the warming charms, the icy wind still bit into his face and hands, which were becoming numb.

Finally they were nearing the outskirts of the little village. “Stop,” Snape suddenly said in a low voice. “Look.”

Two men in black robes were standing in an alleyway, lit by one lone streetlight. “Aurors,” Lupin breathed.

“Or Death Eaters in disguise,” Snape muttered. “I can’t recognize them from here, but it’s safe to say that we can’t go thorough that town.”

“Where are we, anyway?” Harry asked, not really expecting an answer. The village seemed familiar to him, somehow. Like he’d been there before.

Then it struck him.

“I know where we are!” Harry whispered excitedly. “This village is Ottery St. Catchpole.”

Lupin's eyes widened. "The Weasleys. That's where we can go. Harry, do you know which way their house is? I usually floo in or apparate right outside their wards."

Harry studied the town. He'd been there a couple times before, mostly in the summer before his sixth year. "North," he finally said. "That way."

The bedraggled group slowly inched their way north. "Too bad you don't have any of your marvelous Strengthening Solutions, Severus," Lupin rasped, breathing heavily.

Snape didn't answer. Neither did Harry—he was too busy concentrating on the task at hand—but he completely agreed. Strengthening Solutions had saved his life once, and Snape's were sure to be the best around.

They found the road leading out the north side of Ottery St. Catchpole and followed it, but only after making sure that no one was in site, and the Aurors weren't patrolling the roads.

"I can't...go on..." Harry gasped, stopping, and gently lowering his sister to the ground before collapsing next to her.

Lupin instantly sat too.

"Fine," Snape grudgingly conceded. "But only for a minute. We don't have the time."

"Can you conjure up some cups of warm water?" Lupin asked wearily.

Silently, Snape waved his wand and three cups appeared. "*Thermoaguamenti*."

Gratefully, Harry sipped the cup of hot water. He closed his eyes and tried to let himself recharge, but it seemed as if all his energy was gone.

"Up, up, let's get moving," Snape barked, and Harry groaned. His muscles protested as he pulled himself off the ground, but once he'd picked up his sister and began walking again, it was a little easier.

They walked for another fifteen minutes. Harry's warming charm was beginning to run out, but he didn't know the spell himself, and hadn't the energy to call Lupin. It couldn't be too much further to the Burrow, could it? His lighted wand was flickering, but Harry knew it was his eyesight, not the spell itself.

They reached the turnoff, but Harry hardly noticed that they'd changed directions. In fact, when he saw the lights of the Burrow appear over the top of a small hill, it hardly registered in his mind. Not until Snape suddenly let go of Lupin's arm and doubled over as if socked in the stomach.

"Professor Snape?"

Snape backed up a few feet. Harry stared at him. "What's wrong?"

"The wards," Snape said, scowling in the faint light. "I can't get through." He waved his wand and muttered something under his breath, then tried to walk closer to Harry and Lupin, but once again he was stopped by an invisible force. An invisible barrier.

"We can send a Patronus," Lupin said faintly. "We can call Arthur or Molly..."

"No," Snape said sharply. His voice rang out over the silent woods. "No," he said again, more quietly this time. "This is where I'll leave."

"Severus..."

"Lupin, listen to me. They won't understand. They think...in their eyes I'm still the traitor. Can you imagine their reactions if the three of us show up...*together*? And with an unconscious girl they don't know? Consider that."

Lupin was silent for a moment. Then he sighed. "You're right, Severus. You should go."

Harry swallowed hard. "Professor Snape..."

The Potions Master turned towards him. "Just stay out of trouble, Potter. I will certainly not be rescuing your pathetic Gryffindor neck another time."

"But..."

"I can take care of myself. Remember that. Even among the Death Eaters."

"Thank you, sir. For everything."

Something glittered in Snape's eyes, but he simply nodded, turned, and strode away into the night, leaving Harry, Lupin, and the unconscious Leila alone. A moment later, a sharp crack reached Harry's ears, and he knew that Snape was gone.

"Let's go, Harry," Lupin said quietly, his face pale and drawn. "Quickly."

Slowly, painfully, they continued towards the house. Surprisingly enough, the wards didn't seem to have a problem letting Leila through, though Harry didn't time to wonder why. All he cared about was reaching the house.

They dragged themselves up the last small hill, Harry stumbling as he balanced Leila's weight and his own. The Feather-Light Charm was wearing off as well. Lupin was coughing now, and seemed to be just barely holding himself up. The house was close. Through the window, Harry could see the lights of the living room, and the shapes and figures of people gathered around a Christmas tree. His exhausted mind couldn't even comprehend the fact that it was very likely that Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were in that room...

Finally, the front door. Lupin knocked, and Harry slipped Leila off his back and draped one of her arms around his shoulder, keeping her erect. Her head lolled on her chest, and her skin was cold. Harry hoped she was OK. She was still breathing, but since his own warming charm was completely gone by now, it was almost certain that hers was too. *Let her be alright.*

Lupin knocked again. No one was answering; maybe it was because of the noise inside. Lupin leaned against the side of the house, looking exhausted. "The door's locked from the inside," he said.

"One more time," Harry said, hoping, praying, that this time someone would hear.

With seemingly the last of his energy, Remus Lupin raised his hand and knocked on the door.

Three knocks, hard.

Then his hand fell to his side again, and he slumped against the wall.

Harry waited. And waited. And then, oh thank Merlin, he heard footsteps, coming closer, and closer...

The door was thrown open, and the light from inside illuminated the steps and the front lawn.

"Good god in heaven," said Molly Weasley.

Author's Note: It's short, but I can post a short chapter right after the last one, which was a good 5,600 words, by the way. This chapter's only a filler, anyway. Kind of a transitional chapter.

By the way, Leila's dependent on Harry's life force, but not the other way around. She couldn't live in the original reality because she didn't exist there. And as for what Snape will tell Voldemort about where he's been all these months, you'll find out in future chapters. Other questions? Ask away in your review!

I apologize for the cliff. Review and tell me how you like the story so far. I'd expect maybe four more chapters (?) before I wrap this story up. But I'm not sure yet.

Oh, and go check out my other stories. I just posted the beginnings of a new one. "A Deal with the Devil." Frankly, I was sick and tired of these horribly written Ginny/Draco ship stories and decided to try and write a plausible one of my own. Set during Harry's seventh year.

Check out my story *All that Remains* too. I posted that story also as one of my "sick and tired of stupid crappy OC stories" rants. I was becoming revolted by the stupid cliched "Harry meets twin" and "Snape meets lost daughter" and "smart, preppy American exchange student" stories, so decided to see if I could do one better. Oh yeah, and for all of you fans of "The Trio and Ginny Read Fanfiction," I'm working on another installment that I'm sure ya'll will like. (Sorry, it's the Southern coming out in me!) Hopefully that chapter will be out soon.

Chapter 54

For a moment, time stood still. Molly Weasley was frozen in the doorway, Lupin was slumped against the wall, and Harry braced himself against his sister's weight.

Then Lupin spoke. "Good evening, Molly," he said quietly. "Can we come in?"

Maybe that was the last straw. Molly gave a small cry and quickly backed away from the door. "Arthur!" she screamed. "Arthur, come here now!"

Instantly, chaos erupted in the other room. Harry could hear voices shouting and calling. Then he could hear Mr. Weasley's voice over the ruckus. "Stay here! I said, *stay here!*"

"But Dad..."

"NO!"

A second later, a rumpled man appeared in the hallway. "What is it, Molly?" he began, running toward her, his wand out, but then he too froze in his tracks. "Holy Mother of Merlin," he said softly.

Mrs. Weasley finally woke from her trance. "Harry... Remus...is it you? Good gracious...it can't be. But I see you right there...come in, we can sort things out inside...come in, come in. You look half dead. Who's the girl? What happened to her? Where were you? What happened to you...?"

"Molly," Mr. Weasley said sharply, and she fell silent. He stepped forward, his wand still out. "Remus, what did we talk about on that night two summers ago in early June when we were on guard duty?"

Lupin looked about to faint, but he managed a small smile. "How Muggles got to the moon."

In the background, Harry saw the eldest Weasley appear in the hall, his wand out. One glimpse of the visitors on the doorstep, and Bill's face wore an expression of shock as well.

Arthur turned carefully to Harry. "At the beginning of your third year, I pulled you aside before you boarded the train. What did I make you promise?"

Harry swallowed. "You made me swear that I wouldn't go looking for Sirius Black," he said carefully.

Charlie had joined Bill, looking bewildered and confused. They were both lingering in the background

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged looks. Then Mrs. Weasley burst into tears. "It's you...it's really you! Where *have* you been?"

Lupin's knees gave way, and Mrs. Weasley gasped. Mr. Weasley darted forward and was able to catch the werewolf before he hit the ground.

Harry felt as if his grip on Leila was loosening. "Help..." he managed, and a moment later, Bill was there, relieving him of his burden.

"Do you need a hand?" Charlie asked quietly, and Harry shook his head. Without Leila's weight, he could walk by himself. For a little ways, anyway.

The odd procession made their way down the hall. The warmth of the house surrounded Harry like a blanket. Just a few more steps... Just a few more feet until he reached the living room. Then he could rest.

Mr. Weasley and Lupin reached the living room and disappeared through the door. Bill and Leila were next, and Harry and Charlie, last.

He vaguely heard gasps and whispers.

"Oh my god."

"Harry! Merlin's Beard..."

“And Professor Lupin!”

Then Charlie was pushing him into a chair. Harry leaned back, trying to stop the room from spinning, trying to regain his awareness.

Finally his vision focused. Bill had laid Leila onto the couch, and Mrs. Weasley was fretting over her, wand out. Standing across from him were the two people he'd thought he'd never see again.

Ron's face was white as a sheet; every freckle was visible, and for once in his lifetime, he was speechless. Hermione had both hands clasped over her mouth. “Oh my god,” she whispered again, meeting Harry's eyes.

Harry looked away, scanning the room for the other person he was concerned about.

Fred and George were hovering in the background, watching the whole scene with wide eyes. Fleur was sitting stiffly on the armchair next to the fireplace, twisting a strand of hair anxiously. Another older girl Harry didn't recognize was standing next to a wall, shifting uneasily from one foot to another.

He finally found the person he was looking for. Ginny was in the farthest corner, frozen still, her mouth slightly open. Her face was even paler than Ron's, and her brown eyes darted back and forth nervously.

Harry couldn't look away. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Reversing the Aperio had been worth it, just to see her here—with her family and in good health—once again. The picture of the dirty, thin, broken Ginny huddled in the cell in Azkaban was forever engraved in his mind.

Ginny met his gaze. She looked confused and shocked, and maybe a little angry. Harry stared back, trying to convey messages. *I'm sorry. I didn't leave you all here on purpose. Nothing is what it looks.*

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said sharply, and Harry's attention was drawn back to the couch. Mrs. Weasley was still leaning over his sister,

murmuring a diagnostic spell. Lupin was collapsed, half unconscious, in the nearby armchair.

“What happened to her?” Mrs. Weasley suddenly said, turning on him. “What could have happened to make her like this? Who is she, Harry? Why is she unconscious? Did you get into a Death Eater fight? Is it a new spell we haven’t heard about yet? Did you...is she...” The woman trailed off and suddenly turned red. “Harry, is she *pregnant?*”

The last question jerked Harry out of his reverie. “No!” he exclaimed, horrified. “No, no, no!”

In the background, Ginny was inching forward, cautiously drawing closer to the little group huddled around Leila.

Mr. Weasley’s gaze was steely. “Then who is she, Harry?”

Harry gulped. He looked around the room, but every eye was fixed on him. He glanced helplessly at Lupin, but one look at his former Defense teacher and he realized that Lupin would be of no help now.

Harry looked back at Mr. Weasley. “She’s my sister.”

There was a long silence that felt much longer than it actually was.

Then the room exploded.

“No!”

“How is that possible?”

“Harry, don’t lie! Is...is she really?”

“Wicked!”

Harry was sure the last statement had come from the twins, but there was only one person he really cared about right now. A glance at Ginny, and his fears were relieved. Her shoulders had relaxed, and she was inching toward him now with determination etched on her face.

Two more steps, and she had thrown her arms around him.

“Umph. Ouch.”

Ginny released him, her face quickly reddening. “Oh god, Harry did that hurt? I’m so sorry!”

Harry grinned stupidly up at her. “Not a bit.”

“You prat!” she said, but he could see tears in her eyes.

Suddenly the ice was broken. A moment later, Hermione was hugging the wind out of him, and Ron was pounding his shoulder.

“Harry Potter, I can’t believe you just disappeared like that!” Hermione said reproachfully, but nevertheless, she hugged him again.

“It’s so good to see you, mate!” Ron exclaimed.

“How’d you get a sister like that?” Fred demanded.

“Did you trade in someone else for her?” George asked.

“Cause if there’s a sibling-trade program around here, we want to know,” Fred continued.

“Yeah, we’d trade in Ron for a hot chick like her,” George said, eying Harry’s sister.

“George!” Hermione said, slapping the offending twin.

Harry pushed them all away. “Mrs. Weasley, is she OK?”

The woman turned around, her face lined with worry. “You have a lot of explaining to do, young man. If this really is your sister, she’s quite a lucky young lady. From the condition she’d in, she should be dead, but something is keeping her alive...I don’t know what...” She trailed off, confusion etched across her face.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. What if the spell the other Hermione had performed was dark and illegal? Would he and Leila be in trouble

when everyone found out that her life source was the Boy-Who-Lived?

"I need to get Madame Pomphery," Mrs. Weasley was saying, looking worriedly at Leila, then over at Lupin.

"No!" Harry said quickly. "I mean, we need to keep it a secret as much as possible that we've returned," he explained. "No one can find out that we're here. Not with the Death Eaters and Aurors both looking for us."

Mrs. Weasley looked skeptical, but she just bit her lip and turned back to her patients. Finally content that Leila wasn't going to die on her, she turned her attention to the barely conscious werewolf.

A simple diagnostic spell, and Mrs. Weasley gasped.

"What happened, Harry? Look at this!"

Harry rose from the chair and joined her.

"Look at the red marks. Those show recent trauma to various parts of the body."

There were red marks all over Lupin's chest, back, and arms. The thin red lines were tinted with purple, and looked rather like a grossly disfigured spider web.

"But that's impossible," Mrs. Weasley said faintly, pushing up one of Lupin's sleeves and examining his arm. "His skin is unbroken. There aren't even faint scars. The brightness of the red shows that these injuries were recent, but I see no signs...Harry, what happened?"

"We were captured by Death Eaters and held for three weeks," Harry said quietly.

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley gasped. Ginny stepped closer and wrapped her hand around his. Ron muttered some words that Harry was sure Mrs. Weasley would have not permitted in her house, had not the situation been so intense.

“But...but our spy told us nothing of your capture,” Bill said, scratching his head bewilderedly. “The news was that the Death Eaters were still looking for you and...”

He trailed off.

“And Snape,” Mr. Weasley finished, his face paling. “Of course we didn’t connect the two disappearances, since we didn’t learn of Snape’s vanishing for months afterward...”

“But they were connected, weren’t they?” Hermione broke in. “You, Snape, Lupin...”

“Voldemort didn’t know about Lupin, did he?” Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “We kept that our most guarded secret. For all we knew, Lupin had grabbed you and fled to Australia.”

“But that’s not what happened,” Bill said excitedly. “Three people, vanishing on the same night...”

“At the same time,” Hermione put in, her face screwed up in concentration.

“Is Snape back?” Ron interrupted. “Cause if he is, I want to kill him myself!”

Five people hushed him at the same time.

Bill and Hermione met eyes. “Three people,” Hermione breathed. “Three people...”

“On the same night,” Bill said, still looking at her.

“An Aperio?”

Bill nodded. “An Aperio.”

“But one hasn’t taken place for hundreds of years. Why now? Why them?”

Mrs. Weasley crossed her arms. "Will you please tell me what you're talking about? Good heavens..."

They ignored her, but Harry was shaking his head as well. "How did you know?" he asked them quietly. "How *could* you know... It took Lupin several days to figure out why we'd suddenly ended up in a world where..." Harry swallowed. "Where..."

Hermione smiled faintly. "Harry, do you honestly think we sat around like ducks in a pond while you were gone? The Order's been looking for you and Remus, nonstop since June. The Death Eaters have been tearing apart every accessible Light wizarding home in Britain. The Ministry has offered a million Galleon reward for information leading to your capture."

"But I still don't see..."

"Harry, *listen* to me. As soon as you vanished, I pulled out every book I thought might remotely have a chance of having information about where you'd disappeared to. I've been looking for the answer for *six months*. I would have known it was an Aperio by now, except that we thought only you and Lupin had vanished. I didn't know that Professor Snape was gone as well... Not until recently did our new spy bring us that piece of information. And of course we thought he'd bailed out and fled the country. Spying for Voldemort for years can really shorten one's lifespan. I had no idea that he'd disappeared the exact same day as you and Professor Lupin... If I'd known..."

"And I studied Aperios in my post-graduate studies in the University of Egypt," Bill said simply. "We had several courses in ancient and rare phenomena of magic."

Mrs. Weasley threw up her hands. "Hang on. Stop just one second. You're trying to make me believe that you three just disappeared and ended up in some other world? What's that supposed to mean? What have you been doing for six months, having picnics?"

Harry suddenly felt very tired. They wouldn't understand...how could they? How would he ever be able to tell them what had happened in the other reality? Would they even believe him? Apparently the scars

were still present, though not visible from the outside. At least that would provide some evidence. And then there was Leila.

Had he made a mistake in bringing her back here?

And how was he ever to defeat Voldemort here? He knew where the Horcruxes were, but what if the same scenario was repeated in this world?

What if all his friends and family ended up getting murdered—again?

Suddenly a sharp pain shot again through his forehead, and Harry hissed. Another, much more intense pain came a second later, and Harry stumbled back, blindly feeling for the chair. He found it, and sank into it, just as the third, burning pain filled his head and he fell back into darkness.

He was standing in a room, a long, black wand in his hand. The doors were thrown open, and a man stumbled in. A man with long, greasy hair. A man wearing black, dirty robes, and a humbled look on his sharp face.

“Severus, you have betrayed me. How dare you show your face in my presence again?”

“Forgive me, my lord, it was not my choice to be gone,” Snape said, bowing deeply. His hands were trembling, but his face remained impassive.

Harry paused. “How was that so?” he inquired, feeling a strange, unnatural desire to know.

“An *Aperio*, my lord.”

“An *Aperio*? Do not lie to me, Severus! You know the consequences.”

“I swear upon my noble mother’s grave, it is true, my lord. Every word I speak is the truth.”

“Crucio,” Harry said coldly, and the man fell to the floor, writhing in agony, but making not a sound. Harry held the curse for several minutes, then released the Potions Master.

“Thank you, my lord,” Snape gasped, rolling over into the kneeling position once again.

“I demand to know everything about the *Aperio*,” Harry commanded.

“And I shall tell you all, my lord. The werewolf, the Potter brat, and I were all pulled into the unfortunate other reality on the first day of summer.”

“And what was the deciding wish?”

Snape hung his head. “I am ashamed, my lord. I am weak and should be punished. I am not worthy to be your servant.”

Harry waved this aside impatiently. “Just tell me the central binding wish, Severus!”

“I wished that Lily Evans was alive once again,” Snape said. “But it was in a moment of weakness. In the other reality, she and her blasted Gryffindor husband Potter were as unbearable as ever, and I wished that I could once again be rid of them. For in the fulfillment of my heart’s desire also came the fulfillment of my worst nightmare.”

“She and Potter were still married and assumingly in love,” Harry finished for him.

“Yes, my lord,” Snape said, head bowed. “You may punish me if you choose.”

Harry gave him another dose of the *Crucio* curse, but pulled it off quickly, trying not to seem too curious about the other reality.

“So why did you return?”

Snape was breathing heavily, but he bowed. “My lord, the other reality was...most horrible... Potter...he defeated you with the help of Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel.”

Harry felt his face paling at Nicholas Flamel's name. But another part of him—the part of him that was watching the strange scene from high above—was astounded at Snape's lies. Was his former professor trying to get himself killed? Why was he telling Voldemort lies?

"Your most faithful followers fought to the death. It was only by sheer cunning that I was able to convince the Potter brat that I was on his side and that it was in his best interest to return to this world. He is cocky and confident that now that he is back, he can defeat you easily."

A sneer tugged at the edges of Harry's mouth. "You are a sly one, Severus Snape. But are you telling me the truth?"

A quick step forward, and he had yanked the man's chin up and delved into his mind. A stream of pictures and images flashed before Harry, but he could see that they all supported the story Severus had told him. Finally he withdrew his mind and nodded. "You have served me well, Severus."

Snape kept his head down. "I did it for you, my lord. I knew you would never be content unless you could finish off the brat yourself. And I had to leave that horrible world. My only wish is to serve you."

Harry regarded him coldly. "How did that prattling old bastard and the six hundred-year-old codger possibly defeat me?"

Snape glanced anxiously from side to side, making sure there was no one else in the room before he leaned in and said, "You had no Horcruxes in that world."

Harry reeled back. "How did you discover about the Horcruxes?"

Snape bowed again. "My lord, whatever impression I have given you, the fact is that I am not as unintelligent as some of your followers."

"And why did I not make myself Horcruxes?"

"You had the Philosopher's Stone, my lord. But the stone became your downfall, because the bastard Flamel had imbedded in its core

enchancements that would bring the owner to the stone in the direst of situations. He bypassed all your protective enhancements and planted a false stone in its place. Then he waited until the effects of the Elixir of Life had worn off and attacked with Dumbledore and Potter.”

Harry nodded, his eyes narrowed. Snape was being bold, but Harry liked bold. Bold, and ruthless, and sly, and cunning...

No! That's Voldemort, not me! How do I get out?

“Form a shield in your mind,” Snape had said.

“Your secret is safe with me,” the Potions Master said now, but Harry wasn’t listening to him anymore. The scene was fading in and out as Harry desperately tried to detach himself from Voldemort’s mind. It was like trying to make a stubborn horse move, though. Harry was fighting desperately to block out the scene before him.

Snape bowed, and Harry vaguely realized that he—no, Voldemort—had dismissed him.

He was trapped between Voldemort’s mind and his own. But suddenly, Harry felt the pain again—the pain in his scar—and he welcomed it. Instead of trying to block the pain, he let him engulf him, let him pull him farther away from Voldemort and back into his own mind.

A shield. A shield in my mind.

Harry gritted his teeth and imagined a brick wall blocking himself from Voldemort. No, not brick. A stone wall. Like the walls at Hogwarts—strong enough to keep almost any foe out.

His wall had to be even stronger. Strong enough to keep the most accomplished Legilimens of all times out—Voldemort himself.

I can do this, Harry thought, and with one final push, he felt a flash of red hot searing in his scar as Voldemort was thrown out of his mind.

Harry slowly opened his eyes, and found that Hermione, Fleur, and all eight Weasleys were gathered around him, all wearing worried expressions.

“Harry, are you alright?” Hermione whispered. Harry was vaguely aware of Ginny’s hand in his.

Mrs. Weasley silently handed him a glass of water, which he gulped down. It cooled his throat and refreshed him.

“Did you have another vision?” Hermione said.

Harry nodded. “It was Voldemort,” he told them tiredly, pushing himself upright in the chair. “Snape returned to Voldemort, and he welcomed him back into his ranks...” Harry trailed off. Why had Snape told Voldemort all those lies about the other reality? It didn’t make sense. The founding wish of the Aperio had been that both Lily *and* James Potter would be alive again... Maybe Voldemort knew that Snape had liked Lily in his years at Hogwarts. Maybe in Voldemort’s mind, wishing that James Potter was alive once again was an unpardonable sin, and that was why Snape had changed the information.

But then why had Snape completely rewritten the account of the Aperio world? Would Voldemort really believe that for Lily Potter to have survived in that world he himself would have had to choose the Philosopher’s Stone as his route to immortality instead of Horcruxes? It was quite a stretch.

“Snape?! The slimy, greasy, no good traitor...” Ron began.

“Honestly, Ronald, can’t you keep your mouth shut for two seconds?” Hermione snapped.

Ron turned red, but to Harry’s surprise, instead of snapping back, he kept quiet.

Hermione blushed. “I’m sorry, Ron,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean it.”

Ron’s face immediately relaxed, and they exchanged a meaningful look.

Obviously, a lot has happened since I've been gone. Harry would have loved to ponder the new developments between his best friends, but too much was going on right now.

"Snape?" Mr. Weasley said doubtfully. "Harry, he killed Dumbledore."

"On Dumbledore's orders," Harry insisted. "He told me everything, and it all makes sense. I swear, you can go talk to Dumbledore's portrait in McGonagall's office and he'll tell you himself."

They still looked unconvinced. "Harry..." Mrs. Weasley began, but Bill cut in, a grave expression on his face.

"I think you need to start at the beginning, Harry, and tell us everything."

Author's Note: There you go...nice long chapter. More explanations regarding Snape's lies to Voldemort will be in following chapters. Forgive me for making Hermione so smart *again* but it's what I can imagine her doing. Harry disappears, so obviously she has to find out why. And Bill...well, he's into Ancient Runes and curse beaking, right? I can see him knowing that kind of information as well.

I'm not really sure where to end the story and start the sequel. I'll figure it out, though... So don't expect too many more chapters before I bail out and end it.

Review and tell me how you liked the reactions of the Weasleys and Hermione to Harry appearing on their doorstep. I tried to make them realistic but not too overdramatic (Ron took one look at Harry and passed out on the floor-dramatic).

Yes, you'll see some G/H and Hr/R in this story, but I'm not sure if it will be in this story or the sequel. Maybe both.

Oh, and a new chapter of "A Deal with the Devil" is up...check it out on my profile page.

Chapter 55

Fortunately for Harry, Mrs. Weasley had intervened before the other Weasleys forced him to relate his strange tale from beginning to end.

“Not tonight!” she exclaimed, hands on her hips. “Obviously Harry is exhausted. You can ask questions later, when Harry’s feeling better. I said later, Ronald! Now all of you, off to bed!”

They had gone, albeit unwillingly. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had left the room, throwing questioning glances over their shoulders at Harry. Harry smiled weakly at them, too tired to really comprehend much of anything.

Finally, only Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Fleur were left in the room; Mr. Weasley had gone upstairs to make sure that the twins, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione had actually gone to bed. “Do you need ‘elp with ze girl?” Fleur inquired.

Mrs. Weasley wavered, and for a moment, Harry thought she was going to turn Fleur down. But then the woman’s shoulders slumped, and she sighed. “Thank you, Fleur, that would be marvelous. Can you possibly levitate her into the drawing room while I set up a proper bed?”

Fleur nodded, and pulled out her wand. Mrs. Weasley turned to Bill. “Bill, can you look after Remus? I know we’re out of spare rooms, but I need to stay with Harry’s sister tonight, and I think all Remus needs is a few days of good rest. Can you fix up an extra bed in your room?”

Bill nodded. “Shouldn’t we inform the Order...?” he began, but Harry jumped in.

“No, don’t... Don’t tell anyone. Please, you can’t. We don’t know what will happen. Bill? Mrs. Weasley?”

The two Weasleys were staring strangely at Harry, but finally Mrs. Weasley nodded. “If that’s what you want, Harry, I’ll do it, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Do you know how upset the other

Order members when they find out you and Lupin were here and we didn't let them know?"

"I know," Harry said tiredly, rubbing his burning eyes. The weakness was setting in again—he wondered if he'd even be able to make it back up the stairs. "But you'll understand...when I tell you about the Aperio...tomorrow..."

"That's it, Harry, off to bed with you," Mrs. Weasley said firmly. "Ron will be spending the night with Fred and George, so you'll have his room to yourself. Your trunk is there..." She trailed off, her voice breaking. Suddenly, she had crossed the room and engulfed him in a bone-crushing hug. "Harry, Harry... we thought you were dead, but Ron didn't think so... He insisted on keeping your trunk in his room. He said you'd come back some day, and you'd want your things... He never doubted that you'd return. Oh Harry..."

Harry felt a prickling in the back of his throat and had to squeeze his eyes shut to . Ron had believed in him. Ron hadn't given up. Ron...

Ron was more of a friend than Harry deserved. And to think that he'd ever wished he could stay in the Aperio world.

He pulled away from Mrs. Weasley and smiled. "I'll head up to bed now."

She lovingly brushed his hair out of his face. "You do that. And in the morning I'll make you a large breakfast... All your favourites... Now run along..."

With one last glance Leila and Lupin, Harry turned and headed for the stairway. He made it up to the second landing before he realized that he couldn't take another step. Fortunately, a second later, Harry heard footsteps approaching from above, and Charlie rounded the corner and offered to help. Normally, Harry would have been too embarrassed to accept, but tonight he didn't care, and let the second oldest Weasley son help him up the last few flights of stairs.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Charlie asked as they stopped next to Ron's door.

“I’m sure,” Harry said. “Thanks.”

Charlie nodded, and with one last look at Harry, he disappeared down the stairway. Harry turned the doorknob and stepped into Ron’s room.

It was exactly as he remembered it. The shades of orange clashed magnificently. The walls were papered with Chudley Cannons posters. His own trunk stood in one corner, Ron’s bed in another. Harry wavered between the two, but his decision was made quickly and he headed for the bed, clothes and all.

He was asleep the instant his head hit the pillow.

When Harry woke, he didn’t know where he was.

He could tell that he was lying on something soft. He sat up slowly, suddenly aware that he was still wearing his robes, and his trainers were still on his feet.

He blinked a few times, trying to adjust his eyes to the dim light. Outside, the moon hung low in the sky, casting pale beams into the room. The moonbeams reflected off the eyes of the Quidditch players in the posters on the wall.

The Chudley Cannons.

The Burrow.

He was at the Burrow.

It all came flooding back like a tidal wave: The reversed Aperio, the battle against Voldemort for his mind, the midnight trek through the snow, Snape’s departure, their welcome at the Burrow...

He wondered if Leila was awake yet. Maybe he could find Mrs. Weasley and ask her how his sister was doing... But no, no one would be awake; it was still most likely the middle of the night.

Harry groped around for his wand and glasses. Finding both, he first shoved the glasses onto his nose and then lit his wand.

Ron's room looked strange and unearthly in the wandlight. Harry fumbled around until he found the light switch Mr. Weasley had installed by the door.

Once the room was properly lit, Harry noticed his trunk in the corner. *Thank you, Ron*, he thought, and quickly pulled it out so he could undo the clasps and swing the lid open.

His stuff was still packed exactly as it had been when he'd left Hogwarts. The Marauder's Map lay on top, and Harry picked it up lovingly. His Invisibility Cloak was next, and then a pile of robes, shirts, and slacks.

He suddenly had the urge to shower. It seemed like forever since his last shower, back at Beauxbatons. After grabbing a clean set of clothes, Harry shed his outer robe and was surprised to hear a crackling sound coming from one of the pockets.

He stuck his hand into his robe and pulled out the photographs Leila had given him. He had forgotten about them in all the confusion the night before, but now they would help him...they could act as proof, evidence that his story wasn't just made up.

What was he thinking? With Hermione and Bill's confirmation on the Aperio theory, he had no reason to think that his friends would doubt him.

But the pictures were still reassuring.

Harry flipped through them. Leila had included not only pictures of their childhood, but recent pictures and pictures that included the Marauders as well. In the last picture, James, Lily, Remus, Sirius, Jeremy, Neville, the Weasley twins, and most of the Order members were crowded around him, all wearing goofy smiles. It was his seventeenth birthday party. That day seemed so long ago... So many things had happened since then.

Still holding the pictures, he picked up his things and quietly slipped out of the room and down the stairs. Once he had locked himself in the bathroom, he cast several silencing charms around the room to make sure that he wouldn't wake anyone else.

The hot water felt wonderful on his skin. Harry stood under the hot spray for what felt like forever before he finally reached for the soap. He scrubbed for a good ten minutes. It was somewhat symbolic: the Apero world was behind him. He had to focus, to concentrate. Somehow he would pucker up his courage and tell them everything. Then they could plan how to destroy the Horcruxes.

Stepping out of the shower, Harry dried himself off and pulled on his clean clothes. Automatically, he shoved his dirty clothes down the laundry chute that landed in the basement where Mrs. Weasley did her laundry.

Harry smiled. It was good to be home again.

The Burrow was the only place he'd ever really regarded as home, aside from Hogwarts itself. Harry had missed this—the house, the Weasleys, the food, even the smell of the place—whether he'd realized it or not.

Halfway down the hall, Harry realized that he wasn't tired anymore, and what's more, he was craving a hot cup of tea.

He changed directions at the staircase and headed down instead of up, careful to avoid the noisy steps. There was one between the third and fourth floor, three steps up from the third landing. And another right before the stairway came out in the hallway...

He didn't even notice the light shining under the kitchen door until he'd pushed the door open and it blinded him.

"Sssshhhh, I don't want to wake Mrs. Weasley or your sister," someone hissed and pulled him into the room.

Harry rubbed his eyes. Slowly, they adjusted, and a short, bushy-haired girl wearing a light blue robe came into focus. "*Hermione?*"

"Quiet! I haven't put up silencing charms yet."

She pushed him into a chair and whipped out her wand to perform the necessary charms. Harry blinked rapidly, and finally the rest of

the room came into focus. The kitchen was lit by several candles and a lamp. On the stove, a teapot was silently steaming.

“What are you doing here?”

Hermione finished her last incantation and plopped down on the opposite chair, sliding her wand back into her pocket. “I couldn’t sleep anymore,” she admitted. “I felt like a cup of tea.”

“Same here,” Harry said, feeling a little uncomfortable. He hadn’t talked to the real Hermione in over six months, and now, they were sitting here as if nothing had happened, waiting for the kettle to boil.

“The water’s ready,” Hermione said unnecessarily. “What kind of tea do you want?”

“Peppermint,” Harry said, suddenly feeling tired again.

She poured the hot water into two mugs and plunged the tea bags into the hot liquid. Then she tapped each cup with her wand.

“The Perfect-Temperature Charm,” Hermione explained. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Harry said gratefully. He took a long draught, and suddenly the feeling of déjà vu washed over him. Here he was, sipping tea across from someone who wanted answers—only a few months earlier, he’d sat at Sirius’s table in Grimmauld Place and sipped tea and disclosed his plans to rescue Ginny.

He wondered how everyone in the Aperio world was doing. Had Voldemort found and murdered them all? What had happened at Beaubaxtons? Was the other Hermione alright? Or were she and Madame Maxime dead because Nicholas Flamel had backed out and refused to aid in the defense of the school?

“What’s today?” he said abruptly. The thought had occurred to him that the timing might be mixed up now that they were back—maybe the two worlds didn’t run on parallel time systems...

“Why, it’s Christmas,” Hermione said. “I didn’t even realise it until you asked. Happy Christmas, Harry.”

It was Christmas Day. And the only thing Harry could think to say was, "I didn't get you anything."

"It's alright," she said softly, looking away. "I didn't buy you anything either."

"'Cause you thought I was dead," Harry said. It came out harsher than he'd intended.

Hermione looked stricken. "No, Harry! I just didn't want to get my hopes up... Buying a gift and then seeing Christmas pass without you returning would have been too much!"

Harry stared at his tea, ashamed of himself.

"If it helps, though," she continued, "Ron bought you a gift."

"Mrs. Weasley told me about the trunk."

"Oh, that," Hermione said, looking down again. When she lifted her chin, Harry could see tears sparkling in her eyes. "I always thought that out of the two of us, I'd be the last one to ever desert you—especially after the way Ron acted in our fourth year—but he proved me wrong. I was ready to give up so many times, Harry. Even Ginny couldn't hold on much longer—I could see it in her eyes. But Ron—he never wavered. All the Order members—Mrs. Weasley, Mad-Eye, McGonagall, Tonks, Bill and Fleur, Charlie, and all the rest—they all gave up months ago. They told us it was useless to keep wishing, that we'd only get our hopes dashed. Ron was ardent, though. He said you'd come back or send some type of explanation or something. He guarded your trunk with his life. He fought with his mum so many times over that trunk...she wanted to get rid of it, said it was only keeping you alive a few days longer, that we needed to let go and accept the truth: that you were dead. But he wouldn't let her have it."

A long silence followed, as Harry swallowed several times and tried to think of what to say. "Wow," he finally managed. "I mean, I always knew Ron was loyal, but... Wow."

"I guess we were both wrong about him," Hermione said, her eyes shining, and not just because of the tears. "He can be a stubborn prat

sometimes, but what counts is that he's stubborn about the right things."

"Yeah," Harry said, taking another sip of tea and wondering if just maybe this might be another step in the ever-impending relationship between his two best friends. "So," he finally said after another awkward pause. "What's been going on here?"

Hermione pushed a few strands of hair out of her face. "Do you want the whole story?"

Harry nodded, and she sighed. "Well, two days after summer began, the Order realised that you were missing. A day later, we realized that no one had seen Lupin either. The whole summer was one crazy search-and-rescue, really. The Dursleys were placed in safe house, because we knew that V-voldemort would go after you first. Sure enough, the Death Eaters were swarming around Privet Drive—it took the entire Order to keep them from harming the Muggles. Elphias Dodge was killed during one of the fights."

"Poor old bloke," Harry sighed. He knew that death among the Order was imminent, but he was rather relieved that it'd been someone he hadn't known too well. But all the same, the name was added to his mental list of people who had died because of him. Some names were now on that list twice.

"Did you know that he was the first wizard I remember seeing?" he asked her, trying to lighten the mood.

"Even before Hagrid?"

"Yeah. I was out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley once and he bowed to me in a grocery store. Of course the Dursleys were horrified. I didn't get food for a week," Harry said, grinning at the memory. The "abuses" he'd suffered as a child didn't bother him much anymore. They were more humorous than painful.

But obviously he'd divulged a bit too much, for Hermione's hand flew to her mouth.

"No food for a week? Harry..."

"It's nothing really," Harry said quickly. "Please, continue."

"I think the Death Eaters finally realised that you were really gone," Hermione said after a pause. "Then somehow the Ministry found out, and it was chaos—the Order, the Death Eaters, and the Aurors all playing a massive-scale game of hide and seek—but they were all seeking you. The fact that Lupin was gone as well was our most-guarded secret of all. Fortunately, with the Death Eaters all out looking for you, Voldemort didn't have time or manpower to complete what we believe was his next goal—seizing the Ministry. We were able to get a bunch of really good people into office to protect the high-ranking officials from being Imperio'd. Scrimgeour has been helping us a lot, believe it or not. He's quite harsh and I don't approve of his methods, but his meticulous screening has kept the Ministry pretty secure. The Aurors are actually starting to do some good"

"No way," Harry said, thinking that this was even less believable than anything that had happened to him so far. The Ministry actually doing some good. "But what about the people like Umbridge and Percy...?"

"*Umbitch* was sacked," Hermione said distastefully. "A bunch of Hogwarts students testified in court last summer. Most could still show the jury their scars from her detentions, and the awful Defense O.W.L. scores were proof in themselves that she was a horrible teacher."

"Sounds like things have only improved since I've been gone," Harry remarked sourly.

"Only with the Ministry," Hermione said, her voice growing smaller. "The Dementors are everywhere. We don't know how to control them—the Muggles are coming up with all kinds of weird theories for the soulless victims. We can't Obliviate them all, either—there are just too many. And Harry..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "So many people are dead. The Death Eaters have been recruiting, I suppose, so even with the ongoing search for you, they still have time to attack homes. Every night, it's someone else... They killed Dean's entire family because he was a Muggleborn."

Harry could feel the blood draining from his face. "Oh god."

“Yeah. I was there when he found out—Mrs. Weasley made us go back to school last semester.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s staying with Seamus, I think. Evidently his extended family lives in America and that’s too far away. He wants to finish his education, anyways.”

“That’s horrible, though.”

“They attacked my family too, you know,” Hermione said softly.

“Was anyone...”

“My mum and dad are fine. The Death Eaters weren’t able to get through the wards Moody set up. But all the same, we felt it wasn’t safe for them to remain here, so...”

“So?”

“They moved to Italy.” Hermione was talking lightly, but obviously this fact upset her quite a bit.

“Italy?”

“We’ve got some distant relatives there, and my dad loves Italian food. They’ve got savings, so they’re planning on just touring for a year or two, and if the war is still going on, they’ll settle down and start a practice in Milan or something. I’m happy for them,” she finished bravely. “I really am. But...”

“But you still miss them, and it’s not the same.”

She stared into her tea, and Harry, looking up at the clock on the wall, saw that it was half past five. Mrs. Weasley would be up soon, but for now, he wanted the news from Hermione.

When he looked back at her, though, she was staring at him, a strange expression on her face. “You saw your parents, didn’t you?”

The question startled Harry, and invoked a whole chain of memories: Playing Quiddich with his dad. Watching his mum cook in the kitchen. Seeing them at Order meetings. Having them both fuss over him after he'd escaped from Azkaban. Eating meals together with Leila. His birthday party. His dad taking him to Apparation lessons. Listening to his dad and mum reminisce with Sirius about their days at Hogwarts.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up. Herminone was still waiting.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Another silence. "Did...did you have to leave them there when you returned?" she asked tentatively.

"No," Harry replied, his voice a monotone. "They were dead."

"Oh, Harry," she whispered in a choked voice. Then with a grating noise she had scooted her chair closer and reached out for his hand.

They sat there for a long time in companionable silence. It was nice, Harry thought. He'd missed being with his closest friends. Somehow Ron and Hermione always knew what he needed exactly when.

Harry finally took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I thought I was ready," he said quietly. "I thought I could talk about it all, y'know? The Aperio and my parents' deaths and everything...but I guess I can't. Not yet, anyway. And in a couple hours, everyone's going to come tromping down that stairway and start demanding a play-by-play account of the Aperio world... I mean, we could just wait until Lupin is up and make him tell all, but it's still painful for him too... I wish there was an easier way."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Harry, I think I have an idea. Just let me run up to my room for a second."

Chapter 56

By the time Hermione had returned, Harry had thought of a bunch of questions to ask her. But when he saw what she was lugging through the kitchen door, he forgot all about his other inquiries.

“Hermione, where in the world did you get that?”

“It was Dumbledore’s,” she admitted, hoisting the Pensieve onto the table. “He left it to me in his will. But Harry, you won’t believe what his shows! Snape is...”

“Innocent, I know,” Harry finished, and Hermione looked a little put out.

“Oh.”

“He told me himself,” Harry explained. “But this is brilliant, Hermione.”

“You think?” She brightened visibly. “I thought it might be easier this way—you can just put your memories in here and we can look at them. So, what are you waiting for?”

Still, Harry hesitated. “Hermione,” he said, lowering his voice, “have you and Ron told anyone else about the Horcruxes?”

Wide-eyed, Hermione shook her head. “But surely it can’t hurt now, Harry...”

“Is that what you think? That it couldn’t hurt now?” Harry snapped.

“They could help us...”

“You don’t understand.” Harry got to his feet and began to pace, suddenly feeling an overwhelming sense of unexplainable anger. “How could you understand? We can’t start telling every ‘trustworthy’ person who walks through the door. It’ll happen just like last time... Voldemort will find out and then...”

“Harry, what happened?”

“It’s because of the stupid Horcruxes that my parents were murdered—*again*,” Harry burst out, unable to hold his anger in any longer. “And Bill Weasley, and the Longbottoms, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, and several other Order members... Because of the Horcruxes, Sirius and Regulus will most likely be dead before the year is out, and Moody too, and the Weasleys will have to move to America. Because of the Horcruxes, Hogwarts was attacked and a teacher was killed; Leila nearly lost her life; Lupin and I were captured and nearly lost our lives in a god-forsaken prison cell; Beauxbatons is under attack *right now* and if Nicholas Flamel doesn’t get off his lazy arse and do something students will be killed including the other you...”

He sank back into the chair and stared out the kitchen window. The light from the kitchen reflected off of a few lonely snowflakes drifting to the ground. Beyond, the night was still black with no hint of dawn.

“I ruined everything,” Harry whispered. “Everything went wrong.”

“Show me.”

Harry turned in his chair. “What?”

“I said, show me,” Hermione said, her eyes pleading with him. “Please. I need to see.”

There was a long pause. A million emotions and thoughts were tumbling around in Harry’s mind. What would she say if she saw? Could he even muster up the courage to show her his memories?

“Ron needs to see this too.”

“I know,” Hermione whispered. “I’ll go get him. Put your memories in the Pensieve while I’m gone.”

Numbly, Harry nodded, and with one last nervous glance at him, she slipped out of the kitchen.

You’ve got to show them sometime. Maybe now is best. You can get it over with it now, before the rest wake up and start demanding

answers. They can help you figure it all out. Ron and Hermione will understand.

But what if they don't? The unpleasant thought lurked in the back of his mind.

But he knew that if he couldn't trust his two best friends in the whole world, he couldn't trust anyone at all.

Harry pulled the Pensieve towards himself and began to extract memories.

A few minutes later, he was finished. He could faintly hear several sets of footprints coming down the stairway, and a moment later Hermione had dragged a very red-faced, angry Ron into the kitchen. Ron's hair was sticking up in odd places all over his head and his eyes were still puffy from sleep. He was wearing the same threadbare pajamas that only reached halfway between his knees and his ankles. Harry knew that once upon a time, the pajamas had belonged to one of the twins.

Hermione let go of Ron's arm and pulled out her wand, muttering the counter spell for *Silencio*.

"Bloody hell, Hermione!" Ron sputtered. "What was that about? I was positive the house was under attack or something. It's the middle of the night, and you had to come bursting in my room like that... And then you put that stupid silencing spell on me. Have you gone mad...?"

He noticed Harry and trailed off. "Harry? Mate, what are you doing here? Gods, you two are acting strange!"

"Just shut up and act your age for just a few seconds," Hermione snapped, and Ron clamped his mouth shut, eyes wide and confused.

"I put the memories in there," Harry said quietly, pointing to the Pensieve. "But are you sure we'll have time?"

"How many memories do you have?" Hermione asked, but she didn't wait for an answer. "I think we'll be fine, though. It's five forty-five.

Molly will be up in no less than an hour, but I know a spell that can trap us in a unmovable time field for as long as we need. When we come out of the Pensieve, no time will have passed.”

“Isn’t that bordering on the edge of dark magic?” Harry asked, surprised that she’d even suggest using something like that.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “No one has to know, and it’s more like just pushing the boundaries when you need to. Now stay still.”

Harry and Ron stood very still as she began muttering incantations under her breath. A moment later, she took a deep breath. “OK. It’s done.”

“I guess we should go in, then,” Harry said, eying the Pensieve. He pulled out his wand and touched the liquid with it, thinking of the sequence in which he wanted them to view the memories. A faint image of his bedroom at Godric’s Hollow rose to the surface

“Right,” said Ron, looking uneasy. “Uh, you first, Hermione.”

“You two can go together, and I’ll follow,” Harry suggested. “I’ve done it before.”

Before Ron could protest that he was capable of entering a Pensieve by himself, Hermione had grabbed his arm and pulled him into the silvery liquid. Harry watched them disappear, then took one last look at the frozen hands on the clock over the fireplace before leaning into the Pensieve himself.

He was falling, falling, falling...

“Omph.”

Harry had landed next to Ron and Hermione in a very familiar-looking room. Ron was looking a little sick from the ride, but Hermione had smoothed down her dressing gown and was peering about the room curiously.

“Harry, where are we?”

"This is my bedroom at Godric's Hollow," Harry said, watching himself sleep. In a moment the Pensieve-Harry was about to wake up and find out that things were very, very different."

Hermione was examining the room. "Your wand was the same," she observed, pointing to the black wand on the nightstand. Harry joined her on the other side of bed.

"I didn't even notice," he said, frowning.

"Your wand should have been different in that world," she said. "Especially since you weren't ever targeted by Voldemort."

"I don't think I said anything about that, did I?"

"No," Hermione admitted. "But look—no scar. What happened to this wand, Harry?"

"I brought it back with me when the Aperio was reversed. But why did I get the same phoenix core wand in the Apeiro world?" He was genuinely curious, and Hermione, if anyone, would have the answers.

"That's a good question," Hermione said, pursing her lips in concentration. "Maybe...maybe it was because of the Aperio itself. Your wand picked the other you because it knew the real you would be coming along eventually."

"So if I still have this wand from the Aperio world, what happened to my real wand?"

Hermione shrugged. "Probably in your trunk. Ron would know. Ron? Ronald!"

Ron turned around. He'd been studying the Quidditch posters. "Merlin, Harry, the Oxford *Otters*? What kind of Quidditch tastes did you have anyway? Besides, everyone knows Uraiah Yates had to buy himself a spot the team."

"Good heavens, *Ronald*, we're watching Harry's memories and all you can think about is Quidditch!" Hermione exclaimed, but before

Ron could retaliate, the door opened, and James Potter stepped into the room.

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered, and Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Harry, he looks just like you," she whispered.

"Don't I know it," Harry said, closing his eyes tiredly. He hadn't known how painful it would be to see his father again. Hermione put a hand on his arm, but said nothing else.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" Aperiio-Harry was demanding, wand outstretched.

"A little aggressive, don't you think, mate?" Ron said good-naturedly.

Harry shot him a glare. "Yeah, and you would have done something differently?"

"Sure," Ron said, grinning. "I would have decked him."

"Hush," Hermione hissed. "I'm trying to listen."

Ron rolled his eyes, but stopped talking. In another minute, Aperiio-Harry had determined that his father was the real James Potter.

The scene began to dissolve, and when the surroundings materialized again, they were standing in the dining room.

"Breakfast, that morning," Harry said.

"Your mum looks like a Weasley," Hermione commented, a smile pulling at the edges of her mouth. "She's beautiful. And she has your eyes."

"I have her eyes," Harry corrected her.

Hermione listened, open-mouthed as James Potter related the events leading to the banishment of all Muggleborns from any type of Wizarding education in Britain. "That's horrible," she breathed as James paused and Leila stalked into the kitchen. "Harry, how *did* your mother ever survive?"

"She pretended to be a Prewett," Harry said. "She and my dad apparently paid lots of money to have the official records changed. Leila would know better than me."

"Speaking of your sister," Ron said, eying Harry's sister. "Remind me never to cross her in the morning. She looks to be about as bad as Ginny."

"She's worse," Harry said fondly. "You won't believe the similarities, though."

"Quiet," Hermione said again, scowling at the boys. "I'm trying to hear!"

Ron and Hermione both looked shocked when they heard the circumstances surrounding Dumbledore's death. "It gets worse," Harry told them grimly. "Just listen."

"The Order disbanded?" Ron sputtered incredulously. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Just keep listening."

Lily rattled off the list of the dead Order members. "Everyone's dead," Hermione whispered, her face pale. "I can't believe everyone died."

But if Ron and Hermione were shocked, it was nothing compared to what came next.

"...They sent her to Azkaban, that poor little girl," Lily was saying, wiping a tear from her eye.

"THEY SENT HER TO AZKABAN?" Ron and Aperiio-Harry roared together. "But why? Why would they send *Ginny* to Azkaban? She'd never hurt a fly!" Ron continued, rounding on Harry. "HOW COULD YOU LET THEM TAKE MY SISTER TO AZKABAN?!"

"Shut UP, Ronald!" Hermione cried as Aperiio-Harry dashed out of the room and the scene began to change again. "It's *not* Harry's fault! Didn't you hear Lily Potter? The Basilisk killed *four people*. And

Lucius Malfoy was Minister of Magic...of *course* they sent her to Azkaban."

"But she'd be dead by now," Ron cried. "She'd be dead...and it would kill Mum. And Charlie was dead too..."

"She wasn't dead," Harry said tiredly. "Watch."

They were in his room again, and a moment later a knock came on the door and Sirius stepped into the room.

"Sirius," Hermione breathed. "I take it back—what I said about everyone being dead."

Both of his best friends were quite shocked to hear Aperiio-Harry's request to become an Animagus, but they weren't at all surprised when Sirius agreed. "He shouldn't have done that," Hermione chided, shaking her head and clicking her tongue as the scene changed again. "If they had been caught..."

"Oh just put a plug in it," Ron said irritably. "Honestly, Hermione, I'm sure Harry had a reason. Right mate?"

Harry shrugged. "You'll see."

The scene when Lupin told Harry about the Aperiio passed quickly. Then came the first Order meeting. Because he'd wanted to see Ron's reaction, Harry had included the scene with him and the Twins. But evidently that scene had more significance to Hermione than Harry had first figured. "Harry.... Oh my... look, Ron, it's the Longbottoms."

"Oh yeah," Harry said gloomily. "They're alive in this world." But not for long, he wanted to add.

"And look at those other people," Hermione breathed. "Gunther Lowell, Lorella Issianthi, the Quincys..."

"Who are they?" Harry asked, frowning.

"They were other Order Aurors that died rounding up the Death Eaters after V-Voldemort's fall," Hermione explained.

"Look at Fred and George," Ron said, as the twins greeted the other him. "What's wrong with them? They look different somehow."

"Ginny's in Azkaban," Harry said dully. "What did you expect?"

"...but we told her we didn't care," George was saying fiercely. "Anything to fight against You-Know-Who."

Aperio-Harry nodded. "Is Ron here?"

Fred and George gave each other knowing glances. "We understand, mate. Don't worry, he's not here; you're safe," said George.

"What?" said Ron, looking confused, but Hermione shushed him.

Hermione thought the whole Cho situation was quite hilarious. "Ron and *Cho*?" she howled.

"Shut up," Ron said sulkily. "So we've established that Harry and I hated each others guts in that world and Cho dumped me for him."

"It's not that bad, Ron," Hermione said comfortingly. "I'm sure Harry will straighten things out with you. I really can't wait to see me in this world, but Harry said I'm at Beauxbatons, so it won't be for a while."

They followed the Order members into the living room and both Ron and Hermione shared Harry's initial reaction to seeing Peter Pettigrew walk through the door. "Is he still a Death Eater in this world?" Hermione whispered. "I mean, the prophecy was never made, so he wouldn't have had a reason to betray your family to Voldemort..."

"But we think he became a Death Eater during his seventh year of school," Harry said. "That was a couple years before the prophecy, so things in this world haven't changed, except that he's been Voldemort's Order spy for seventeen years."

By the end of Lupin's moving speech, Hermione had tears in her eyes again. "I can see why they disbanded the Order," she said, sniffing. Ron put his arm awkwardly around her, and Harry noted this new development. "So many people have died... Even Fleur...and Tonks and Charlie. No wonder Lupin was so anxious to come back to this world."

The Order members were now rising to their feet and signing the parchment.

"What happened to Tonks?" Harry asked.

"I haven't seen her much," Hermione said, avoiding his gaze. "Well, you remember how depressed she was last year. Let's just say that this year, it's ten times worse. I haven't seen her hair any colour than brown or black or grey for the longest time... She hardly even talks about Lupin anymore. I think it's too painful."

The scene fast-forwarded to the exclusive Order meeting, and the trio watched Lupin disclose the Horcrux secrets to the members.

"That was our first mistake," Harry said. "We shouldn't have told everyone..."

The scene faded into Harry's bedroom once again. Leila was sitting in the chair at the end of Harry's bed. "I've just told her everything," Harry explained. "She got too suspicious... I mean, on the first day of summer, it seems that I underwent a complete personality change. You heard my dad, I played Keeper."

"What's the real reason you've been going over to Sirius's house every day?" Leila was saying.

"He's studying for N.E.W.T.'s, of course," Ron said sarcastically.

"I'm going to become an Animagus," Aperiio-Harry said.

"Why?"

"So I can get Ginny out of Azkaban."

Leila's mouth dropped. So did Ron's and Hermione's.

"You...you...what?"

"I'm going to save Ginny from Azkaban."

"That's impossible!"

"Exactly my response," Hermione said weakly. "Harry, were you mad?"

"No, it's not. Sirius did it, Barty Crouch did it, and I can do it too. I'll come up with a plan."

"You're mad."

"I'd have to agree with your sister on that one, mate," Ron said, shaking his head incredulously. "You're mental. Did you do it?"

Harry shook his head. "Wait and see."

The scene faded out, and Moaning Myrtle's bathroom appeared. Lupin and McGonagall had just stepped inside. "Harry, what are we doing here?" Hermione asked.

"Do you remember how the Order asked for proof about the Horcruxes?" Harry said, and her eyes widened. "We're here to get proof."

"The diary," Hermione breathed. "But would it be in the Chamber?"

"We searched the entire school. The Chamber was our last stop."

"But I don't see you anywhere," Ron said, a split second before Aperiio-Harry appeared out of thin air.

All three jumped. "Wow, I never knew it looked like *that*," Harry said.

A minute later, had disappeared down the slide, and the trio warily followed. "Are you sure this is safe?" Hermione said nervously. "I mean, the Chamber is miles under the school, and there's a Basilisk there..."

"We *know*, Hermione," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Harry and I have been there before. This is a memory, though. Nothing can hurt you here."

"Of course you're right," she said, relaxing a little. "But still..."

"Just go!" Ron exclaimed, and she finally disappeared down the slide.

"Oh, that was loads better than the first time," Ron said as Harry flew out of the pipe. "But the bones are still here."

Hermione looked a little disgusted, but she puckered up her courage and followed Ron and Harry down the dark passageway. Harry broke into a jog, and his friends followed.

"I didn't know we'd be required to exercise in the Pensieve," Ron grumbled, panting. "I always figured that it'd be more like one of those Muggle theaters, you know? Where you'd just sit back and watch things happen."

They finally reached the Chamber, and once again the site of the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin brought a host of unwanted memories flooding back into Harry's mind. Ahead, the other Harry was running for the base of the statue and holding up the diary.

"Why was it down here?" Ron asked as they caught up to Lupin and McGonagall.

Harry shrugged.

"Maybe Riddle told her to keep the diary down here just in case someone else found it and figured things out," Hermione suggested.

Aperio-Harry was now explaining to Lupin the events that had happened in the Chamber. Ron and Hermione looked stricken as they listened.

"Oh, Harry, you never told us that..." Hermione whispered after Harry had related the part about Riddle mocking him as he was dying.

Harry shrugged. "It wasn't important. Watch."

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Remus, Harry, I think it is about time to be going," she said. "I believe you have more to tell me than you first let on."

The scene faded, and Ron and Hermione both turned to Harry. "So?"

"So, what?"

"Did you tell her?"

"Yes."

Now they were standing in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place. Aperiio-Harry was looking at the tapestry.

"Grimmauld Place? Did Sirius live here?" Hermione asked, looking around.

"Yes, and I came here every day for Animagus lessons. Check out the tapestry, though."

Sirius had already entered the room and was talking to Aperiio-Harry. The trio crowded around the tapestry. "Look at the name next to Sirius's," Harry instructed them.

"Regulus Artemis Black," Ron read. "So?"

Suddenly Hermione gave a small cry of recognition, and Harry smiled.

"Don't you get it, Ron? It's R.A.B.!"

"Ooooh," Ron said, finally 'getting it.' "Regulus Black...didn't Sirius mention something about Regulus getting snuffed by Voldemort?"

"But in this world," Harry said, "Regulus is still alive. See the dates under his name?"

"Did you meet him?" Hermione asked excitedly.

Harry nodded. "But not for a while. You'll see."

Ron and Hermione were both appalled as they viewed the next Order meeting and saw Peter Pettigrew's escape. "The room was full of Aurors!" Ron sputtered. "How could he have gotten away?"

"I suppose he'd gotten pretty good at running and hiding over the years," Harry said bitterly. "He survived that long with the Death Eaters, anyway."

The second half of the Order meeting was the hardest for Ron. Harry looked over at his red-headed friend and could see Ron's hands shaking several times through the emotional scene. The Weasley family had been deeply affected by Ginny's imprisonment and Charlie's death, but when Ron saw Percy taking all the blame and the twins insisting that it was their fault too, he turned his back, probably to gain control once again. Hermione and Harry exchanged glances, but Hermione shook her head, and Harry figured she probably knew better than he what to do in a situation like this.

"Now they have proof, and they can't even take it to the Ministry because Malfoy is Minister," Hermione whispered after Moody spoken. "How awful."

By the end of the Horcrux-hunting assignments, Ron had regained his composure, and had rejoined Harry and Hermione to view the next scene. Harry had skipped the birthday party, much as he'd have liked to show Ron and Hermione the part where Ron had tried to hit Harry for stealing his girlfriend. They'd have something to give Ron a hard time about for months. But there simply wasn't time. They'd already been inside the Pensieve for over an hour.

In the next Order meeting, everyone was giving their reports from the Horcrux hunt. Ron and Hermione listened intently.

"Riddle's orphanage," Hermione said after Bill and Kiara had finished their report. "I thought of that, but I was doubtful that Voldemort would put a Horcrux right in the middle of so many Muggles. So is the Horcrux at the Orphanage?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Keep listening."

Moody read the note from R.A.B., and then Sirius confessed that his brother was still alive. Then the scene changed once again; but this time, they were still in blackness.

“What? Where are we?” Ron asked.

“Lumos,” Hermione said, and jumped out of the way just in time to avoid Aperio-Harry sneaking down the front hall of the Potter’s house at Godric’s Hollow. “Harry, what’s going on?”

“Watch,” Harry said, and they followed the other him down the hall and watched as he slipped the Invisibility Cloak over himself and the bag he carried. The front door opened seemingly of its own accord, and Hermione’s wand lit the front lawn as the three crowded around the door. The other Harry had just tripped over the big black dog, which immediately transformed into Sirius. Hermione gasped.

“Accio Invisibility Cloak!” Sirius cried, and Aperio-Harry appeared.

“Where were you going?” Ron said, elbowing Harry. “Sneaking out to see Cho?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You know I don’t like her. You’ll see where I was going. Oh, and my seventeenth birthday just passed.”

Ron and Hermione listened intently to the conversation. “You should’ve known better than to cross Sirius,” Ron said good-naturedly as the Aperio-Harry and Sirius disappeared with a pop. The colors changed, and they were standing in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place.

“Oh,” Hermione said, once Harry’s whole story was out. “Harry, you’re crazy to attempt that alone! You’ll be killed!”

“I know,” Harry said. “And that’s why I’m lucky. Look what happens next.”

“Therefore, there is only one thing left for me to do,” Sirius was saying.

“What’s that?”

“I can help you.”

Hermione shook her head as the scene dissolved once again. "I still say you're both mad. Did you pull it off?"

Harry shrugged. "You'll see."

Ron was strangely quiet as they watched Harry and Sirius making preparations for Operation Rescue Ginny. Hermione was vocally outraged at the unfairness of Ginny's trial, and equally horrified to learn that Ginny's parents and the Order members hadn't been allowed at the trial, nor permitted to visit the girl in prison. She fell silent, however, as the surroundings faded into the grim walls of Azkaban.

They followed the guard and Sirius who was supporting Harry down the long corridor and stopped at Ginny's cell door. "Brace yourselves," Harry told his friends quietly.

And just like he remembered it, the metal door swung open.

Author's Note: And I had to stop, because this chapter would have been horrendously long if I'd written all the way to the end. It hasn't been betaed, so I appologize for any canon/spelling/grammer errors.

I'm thinking I'll go back to my original plan of sixty chapters. And then I'll write a sequel. I must say, thank you for ALL your suggestions and emails! I couldn't reply to all of them, but I must say, you've given me some marvelous ideas!

So, be prepared for a good Ginny/Harry fluff scene, with some Tonks/Lupin on the side. And maybe even a little Ron/Hermione before I end the story.

Still haven't decided if Harry will tell Ginny about the Horcruxes. It'd be a good idea, you know, but it's not something Canon Harry would do.

Chapter 57

The cell door swung open, and Sirius and Aperio-Harry froze.

“Darnit, I can’t see!” Ron muttered, trying to get a look, but then Sirius moved forward, and Ginny came into sight.

She looked even worse than Harry remembered, but maybe it was because this was the second time around, and he wasn’t having a Dementor hangover. Once again, Ginny was curled up in a little ball, covered in filth. Every bone was visible, displayed by the skin stretching tight over her pitifully small frame. Her hair was matted and long, and her face was buried in her arms.

Ron gave a deep guttural moan and swayed a little. Hermione put both hands over her mouth and just stared wordlessly.

“Don’t just stand there, boy, get over here and help me!” Sirius barked, and Aperio-Harry moved forward, allowing the trio room to move into the cell.

Hermione ventured in, her eyes sweeping quickly over the horrible conditions, the slimy stone walls, the small barred window at the top of the cell. Harry started to follow her in, but Ron was still standing frozen in the doorway.

“Are you alright, mate?” Harry asked quietly.

Ron shook his head and his hand reached out for the frame to steady himself. “God, Harry, what have they done to her?”

“She’ll be alright,” Harry mumbled. It hadn’t been a good idea to bring Ron here. He should have skipped this scene... He shouldn’t have put his best friend through this...

But if he’d done that, they would have never understood.

“She’ll be alright,” Harry said again, a little louder this time. “I promise, Ron, she’ll be fine. You’ll see. It gets better.” *And then it gets worse. But worse for me, not for them.*

His words seemed to have an effect on his friend. Ron took a deep breath and looked up. "She'll...she'll recover?"

"Yes."

With another deep breath, Ron nodded and followed Hermione into the cell.

"Who are you?" Ginny was whimpering, looking very scared and alone.

Sirius introduced himself and dished out the potions. In any other circumstances, Harry was sure Ron would have given him a hard time about Polyjuicing into a girl, but neither Ron nor Hermione said anything as they watched the plan being carried out. Finally, Sirius said, "Harry, be careful," and left.

The cell dissolved, and both Ron and Hermione turned to Harry. "What now?" Hermione whispered.

In reply, Harry pointed. They were back in the same cell, but it was dark, save for the faint light shining through the window. "Lumos," Hermione whispered, and the cell was filled with light.

A visibly thinner Harry was huddled in the corner of the cell. The wandlight showed dark circles under his eyes, and dirt and grime all over his clothes.

"You look like you haven't slept in days," Hermione breathed.

"I didn't," Harry said, studying himself. "The Dementors."

As they watched, Harry pushed himself up, took one cautious look around, and then closed his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked, frowning, but Hermione's mouth had dropped open.

"Harry, you're...you're..."

A second later, there was no Harry. Only a tawny brown falcon with bright green eyes reflecting the light.

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered.

Then the falcon took flight and disappeared through the window.

Hermione turned to Harry. "That was brilliant," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "The perfect escape plan. You were incredible."

"Sirius helped," Harry began, but already the colors were changing again. They were in the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Hang on, it's too fast," Ron said as Harry and Leila pushed their way through the crowd, heading for their favourite seats by the fire. "What happened?"

Harry shrugged. "Regulus met me behind that bar Sirius and I stayed at before we went to Azkaban. He apparated me back to Grimmauld Place where I spent a few days recuperating and trying to convince my parents that I was fine. Ginny was put on strict bedrest and the Weasley family was informed. Then..."

But he never finished, for Hermione had thrown her hand over her mouth again. "Oh my. Look, Ron!"

"Oi, Harry! Where have you been, mate?" Jeremy was saying.

"It's Jeremy!" Ron exclaimed. "What...how...?"

"He was my best mate in the Aperio world," Harry said, frowning. But how on earth do *you* know him?"

"He transferred to Hogwarts this year," Hermione explained. "And Melissa, too, though she was Sorted into Hufflepuff."

"Why..." Harry began, but Hermione shushed him.

"I want to hear what you're saying."

"That Clark woman is a hag," the black boy was saying, and Aperio-Harry replied.

“Nice one,” Ron said when Harry told Jeremy that he’d decided to be an Auror. “Not a lie, but not the whole truth why you’re changing all your classes around. Ancient Runes...” He snorted, and Hermione gave him a disdainful look.

When we had career meetings in our fifth year, I told McGonagall I wanted to be a Curse Breaker,” Jeremy said suddenly. “I always thought it would be cool, and Ancient Runes was always my favorite class.”

“That’s cool! Isn’t Bill Weasley a Curse Breaker?” Harry replied.

“Yeah, and I’ve always wanted Ron to introduce me to him, but we’ve never been on the best of terms. Especially because I’m friends with you.”

Ron looked disgruntled. “All over a stupid girl. I’m sorry, mate.” But he cheered up when he heard about the prank he’d supposedly pulled on Harry the year before. “Who’d you kiss, Harry?”

“Parvati,” Harry admitted, glaring at the floor as Ron howled with laughter and Hermione shook her head.

“Boys,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Jeremy kissed Parkinson,” Harry said defensively, and Ron began laughing again.

“I can’t wait to bug him about it,” Ron said, but then his face fell. “Oh, right. It wasn’t him. Merlin, this is strange.”

Harry had included one of his classes with Clark in the memories, so they could see exactly how awful she was. “She’s a horrible old cow!” Ron exclaimed after Clark had taken away thirty points from Gryffindor when they were doing much better than the Slytherins.

“But...but Harry, you’re doing the counter spell for Vanishing,” Hermione said. “That was sixth year curriculum.”

Harry sighed. “The Minister of Magic is Malfoy. The whole curriculum was simplified, and all the tests were rigged so Purebloods will get better scores.”

“That’s horrible,” Hermione whispered, and while Harry agreed with her, he knew there were much bigger problems in this world—some of which they would discover soon.

For Ron, he’d pulled out some of his Quidditch memories. Of course Ron wanted to know all about the teams; who was playing each position, why he hadn’t been on the team himself, and who had become the next Seeker.

“I put you on the team and played Seeker,” Harry said, a little embarrassed. “Evidently Dad...taught me to play Keeper growing up. Leila says I was good at it, but obviously I’m not now. So I needed a Keeper, and you were the best option I had.”

Ron’s ears turned red, but he grinned.

Ron and Hermione watched intently as the next Order meeting flew by. “Spells to destroy the Horcruxes,” Hermione said thoughtfully after Regulus’s report. “I guess Regulus would have been an expert, huh? Too bad he’s...dead. He did all the work, and now we’re going to have to go through the same process here.”

Ron was outraged when McGonagall proposed Luzita Clark joining the Order. “No way!”

“Yes, way,” Harry said grimly.

“I don’t see why you’d be *that* upset, Harry,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. “I mean, she doesn’t seem like a very nice person, but one more person working to defeat Voldemort won’t hurt, will it?”

“This one will,” Harry said, clenching his jaw. Hermione and Ron exchanged looks, but didn’t say anything.

Harry hadn’t wanted to include the scene where he and Ginny talked, feeling it was too personal, but he knew that Ron would want to see

at least a little of his now somewhat healthier sister. He hung back as the scene changed into Ginny's bedroom.

"Yup, same Ginny," Ron said lightly, at the end of the conversation, but Harry could hear the catch in his voice.

"I think she hit the nail on the head, though," Hermione said, grinning at Harry and punching him in a very un-Hermioneish way. "Romantic motives, you know."

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep the blood from rushing to his face.

The bedroom faded into the Owlery. Apparition-Harry was there, and a moment later, Hermes soared into the Owlery carrying a package.

"You were getting packages from Percy?" Ron said incredulously.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not Percy, the twins. Percy let them borrow his owl."

"Which is something this world's Percy *never* would have done," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione followed the other Harry down the steps and through the seventh-floor corridor.

"The Room of Requirement? But why is this important?" Hermione asked after the other Harry had bumped into Leila and the two had fled into the Room of Requirement.

"You'll see," Harry said, following himself down the aisles.

Apparition-Harry stowed away the book in the cupboard, and turned back to leave, but was confronted by his sister who wanted to stay and look around. Then he caught sight of the tiara.

"A tiara? What's so special about that?" Ron began, but Hermione gripped his arm.

"Don't you remember? Ravenclaw's tiara! But how on earth did it get here? I just can't see Voldemort hiding a Horcrux here at Hogwarts."

The scene changed, and McGonagall, Sirius, and Moody were all crowded around the tiara. The letter was produced and read.

“A.Y.,” Hermione mused. “Who’s that? Maybe it is a Pureblood like Moody suggested...but it could have been almost anyone, huh? Though the letter does seem like a Pureblood wrote it...”

The Room of Requirement faded into the Great Hall, and Harry suppressed a grin. He’d included parts of the Prank War, knowing that Ron would enjoy seeing himself.

Aperio-Harry and Jeremy were watching Ron intently as Ron picked up his goblet. “Don’t drink it...” Hermione said, shaking her head, but of course the other Ron couldn’t hear her.

A second later, he’s turned to a Ravenclaw prefect and said, “Do you want to snog me in the broom cupboard?”

Harry laughed, and Ron scowled. “I bet I got you back good for that one,” he said.

“You did,” Harry assured him. “You hexed our beds so they felt like nails. Jer and I had to sleep in the Room of Requirement until we could figure out how to remove the jinxes. The Ravenclaws were behind you—they helped you plan all your pranks. But we had Fred and George, so it was about equal.”

Now they were standing in the green house. “What...?” Ron began, but Harry pointed.

Leila and Theodore were snogging, and Aperio-Harry was approaching, looking extremely upset. “Is that *Nott*?” Ron exclaimed incredulously.

“GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY SISTER!” the other Harry bellowed, as the real Harry nodded.

“But...but he’s a Slytherin!”

“I know,” Harry said. “I have no idea how they met, only that it didn’t start this year.”

“Wow,” Ron commented, watching the shouting match that followed. “Remind me never to snog your sister, Harry.”

Hermione hit him. “Ron! I’m sure you won’t be doing that. Besides, it looks like she’s only got eyes for...” She trailed off and her eyes widened. “Harry, do you think.... Leila, I mean, will she... Theodore...”

Harry sucked in his breath. “No, she wouldn’t.” But he wasn’t sure. Would Leila pursue a relationship with Nott in this world? Nott was probably a completely different person in this reality...maybe he’d already taken the Dark Mark. It was very likely, actually. Leila wouldn’t be so stupid...or would she? She’d been genuinely infatuated with him in the other world.

He shook his head. “We’re jumping to conclusions,” he said, watching Leila put the Silencio spell on him.

“Actually, remind me never to cross your sister at all,” Ron said, elbowing Harry good-naturedly. “It looks like she’s got you under control, anyway.”

“Shut up,” Harry said irritably, at the exact same moment Hermione said it too.

“I’m trying to listen,” she clarified, when both boys turned to her.

Aurelia Yaxley was revealed to be A.Y., and Nott left with Harry, Leila, and Sirius. The scene changed again, and they were at the next Order meeting. Moody and Harry had a quick conversation, and then the meeting begun. Clark was there, and they discussed the Horcruxes. The meeting was just as boring as Harry remembered, but he was tense, knowing what was coming next.

Now they were in the Gryffindor common room, and Aperio-Harry was slowly pulling himself away from the crowd of students partying. He headed up the stairs, and the trio followed.

“What was the party for?” Hermione asked.

“We won our first match.”

Aperio-Harry plopped down on his bed and spread his books out, but then Lupin began calling his name.

“That mirror was a marvelous idea,” Hermione said, as the other Harry fished it out of his trunk.

Harry was quiet. He didn’t want to watch this scene—not again. He turned away.

“Voldemort’s found out that the Order has been destroying his Horcruxes,” Lupin said, and Hermione gasped.

Harry stared pointedly in the other direction, his shoulders tense as Lupin listed the people dead. He heard Ron groan again when Bill was mentioned, but when his parents’ names were listed, there was only silence behind him.

The scene began to fade, and he slowly turned back to his friends. Hermione was staring at her feet, silent tears dripping off her nose. Ron looked stricken, the streetlight illuminating his pale face as a back street in Hogsmeade materialized around them.

“Mate, I’m sorry.”

“It’s in the past.”

“But seeing them again, and then finding out they were dead... I’m sorry.”

Harry closed his eyes. “I can’t change things now. At least...at least I’ve got Leila.”

“That you do,” Ron said. He was quiet for a moment, then he said, “How...how did my parents take it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. “I didn’t see them again.”

The black dog in the alleyway changed into Sirius, and the falcon on the signpost flew closer, transforming back to Harry.

Ron and Hermione silently watched the scene unfold: the fight with the Death Eaters, Snape's appearance, the truth about the third person in the Aperio, the real story behind Dumbledore's death.

"That's what the Pensieve said too," Hermione said as the colors swirled around them at the end of the memory. "The last memory in the Pensieve was a memory of Dumbledore writing a letter...a letter to you, Harry. The letter said we were not to tell the Order of Snape's true loyalties, that as Voldemort's second-in-command he would be better able to kill Nagini, and that Dumbledore himself was planning his death, though he wasn't sure yet when it would occur. We didn't tell anyone."

"Good," Harry said, as the Hog's Head came into focus around them.

The conversation with Snape passed quickly, and before Harry knew it, they were following the other Harry through the halls of the school at a run. Hermione sucked in her breath sharply as they skidded to a halt at the top of the stairs leading down to the entryway. "Death Eaters!" she whispered. "How'd they get in the school?"

"You'll see," Harry said. "Come on."

Ron and Hermione watched the duels open-mouthed. But when Aperio-Harry confronted Clark and she turned out to be Narcissa Malfoy...

"That bi..." Ron began, but Hermione stomped on his foot.

"Language, Ronald!" she reprimanded, then turned to Harry. "Merlin, Harry, do you know that this means? She could be anywhere—acting as one of the Order members, pretending to be a teacher, playing Minister of Magic..."

Harry nodded grimly. "Which is why we need to inform the Order as soon as possible and begin using some type of true identification system...maybe Veritiserum or perhaps a secret coded password..."

"Duck!" Ron yelled, and Harry turned just in time to see himself hit by the stunning spell.

Hermione gasped. But before she could speak, the Pensieve had gone dark.

“Where are we?” Ron asked. “Oh, never mind.” He pulled out his wand. “Lumos.”

Hermione gasped again. “Oh my god. Harry, is that you?”

Ron whistled. “You look horrible, mate. What’d they do, try every kind of Muggle and magical torture on you they could think of?”

Harry studied himself. It had only been a couple days since he’d taken captive, but he already looked much worse than he had after three days in Azkaban. He was huddled in the corner of the cell, gasping for breath as he kept his arms wrapped tightly around his broken ribs. He was also covered in blood from the interrogations, not to mention being extremely thin and dirty.

He was suddenly glad that he hadn’t included any memories of the actual torture sessions—there were some things Ron and Hermione definitely didn’t need to see.

The door banged open, and several Death Eaters entered to take Harry away. The trio followed, and both Ron and Hermione were horrified to see that Lupin had been captured as well. Lupin and Harry talked, and Ron actually laughed when Aperiio-Harry told Lupin that Voldemort thought he was the Heir of Slytherin.

When the scene changed, they were still in the cell, but Lupin was looking very, very different.

“He’s going to transform,” Hermione exclaimed, horrified. “Harry, he’s going to transform into a werewolf...look at him!”

“I know,” Harry said wearily, watching himself huddled at the other side of the cell, throwing frightened glances at his former teacher. “That was the idea.”

“But he’ll kill you!”

The cell door opened, and there stood Dolohov. "Watch," Harry said quietly, as the Death Eater told them to say their last goodbyes. He turned away, but suddenly he cried out and fell to the ground, blood pouring out of wounds. Hermione put her hand over her mouth and clung to Ron's arm.

Snape strode in, his robes billowing magnificently behind him. "Over here, Potter! Can't you see we're out of time?"

Hermione let out a sigh of relief as the Portkey whisked away the three members of the Order. "I was worried there for a moment," she sighed. "I can't believe they locked you two up in a cell for the full moon. That's barbaric!"

"Since when have the Death Eaters been civil to their captives?" Ron pointed out, then frowned. "Where are we now?"

Harry looked around. The bedroom was bright and sunny, the light falling on the still figure on the bed. "We're at Lupin's house," he said. "Snape brought us here."

"You look awful," said Hermione unnecessarily, walking over to the bed. "Oh, you're awake! Why can't you move, though?"

Harry watched the door, waiting for Ginny's entrance. "Aftereffects of too many Cruciatus Curses," he said simply.

"My name is Harry Potter," the other Harry said carefully, and Ron snorted with laughter.

But he cut off mid-chuckle when the door opened and Ginny slipped into the room. "And I'm Ginny Weasley. It's nice to meet you."

The look of relief on Ron's face at seeing his sister well, even if she was a little thinner and her eyes a little more guarded, was worth a million galleons. "She's OK," he mumbled, not taking his eyes off of Ginny. "She's alive."

"That she is," Harry said, smiling.

"But why is she here?" Hermione asked, patting Ron's arm.

"She couldn't exactly stay with the Weasleys, now could she?" Harry said. "The Aurors are still looking for her. For the first two months she was living at Grimmauld Place with Regulus, so naturally she stayed there when she got better. And then the attacks occurred, and they had to evacuate. So they went to Lupin's house."

The conversation continued, and Ron choked when Ginny called Snape by his first name. "Thank you," Harry said loudly. "I thought it was weird too!"

"Oh, cut it out, you guys," Hermione snapped.

Things moved very quickly after that. Harry wisely had omitted the conversation with Ginny when things had gotten just a little too carried away. The memories picked up when he and Ginny entered the living room.

Hermione smacked her head. "Of course you'll have to leave," she said when the conversation was finished. "You're the Secret-Keeper! That's why Lupin was so anxious to get you out of there."

Harry nodded appreciatively. "Right."

Rather than take them through his last memories of Hogwarts, he simply explained that the International Portkey was bound for Beauxbatons and that Leila had convinced McGonagall to let her go too. The way Hermione's eyes widened at the word "Beauxbatons" let Harry know that she had not forgotten that this was the part of the story where *she* came in.

Ron whistled at the high ceilings and elegant marble floors of the French equivalent of Hogwarts. "I'm glad I don't go here."

Harry agreed wholeheartedly, but Hermione was watching the students with a gleam of jealousy in her eye. It suddenly occurred to Harry that his best friend was a girl. Odd as it sounded, she'd been more of a tomboy during their earlier years at Hogwarts, but of course that usually came with having two boys as your best friends. Maybe on the inside, Hermione was just as girly as Lavender and Parvati... Maybe she too craved pretty dresses and elegant rooms and delicate jewelry...

Harry made a mental note to remind Ron of this fact, but then the surroundings melted into Madame Maxime's office, and Harry nudged Hermione. "Here's your entrance," he said.

But first, Hermione had to get over seeing Nicholas Flamel alive. "I can't believe it," she exclaimed. "The smartest man in the world... And I read that he could have defeated Grimwald if he'd felt like it."

"It's true," Harry told her, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Guess why he hasn't lifted a finger to stop Voldemort yet?"

Hermione's eyes went wide. "No... Are you serious?"

But then, the door opened, and Ron sucked in his breath.

Harry and Hermione turned, and for a moment, Harry was frozen. Aperio-Hermione hadn't seemed that different from the Hermione he knew, but when both were in the room, there was an obvious difference.

Aperio-Hermione was an ice queen. She stood tall and stiff, her clothes perfect, her hair shiny. Ron was gaping; Hermione simply stared.

"I looked like that," she whispered.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"No, I mean, I looked like *that*."

Harry finally got her meaning, but surprisingly, Ron, who was usually like a block of wood when it came to these things, got there first. He picked his jaw up off the ground, grabbed Hermione's shoulders, and spun her to face him. "Listen to me, Hermione. You're a thousand times prettier than she is."

Hermione stared back. "Really?" she whispered.

"Really," Ron said.

And it was true. Watching his best friends, Harry knew that Ron wasn't lying. Even in her robe, her hair a frizzy mess, her eyes shadowed with black circles from lack of sleep, her face sporting a few more lines than it had on the last day of school, she looked much more beautiful than the Hermione who had attended Beauxbatons, grown up with the popular girls, and become Madame Maxime's personal assistant. Her eyes were kinder, her features softer, and her smile wider.

Ron and Hermione had been staring at each other for a long time, completely disregarding the events occurring around them. For a moment, Harry thought they would kiss, but since he really didn't want to be a witness to *that*, he cleared his throat loudly.

"Um, guys..."

Ron and Hermione jumped, the blood rushing to their faces. "What?"

"This is important."

They were in the library. Leila was buried behind a large stack of books. Harry was sitting nearby, twirling a quill in his hands.

"Lot of help you were, mate," Ron said, having regained his composure.

"We convinced the Headmistress to let you help Flamel with the Aperio research," Harry told Hermione, ignoring Ron's jab.

Just then, the doors of the library flew open. "I found it... I found it!" she was yelling, waving a piece of paper.

"Found what? What did I find?" Hermione said, bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet. She quickly crowded around to see what was drawn on the paper.

"The triqueta! Of course," she finally breathed, stepping away. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

“Probably because Harry didn’t ask you to solve the Aperio,” Ron said as they followed Harry, Leila, and Hermione up the stairs to Flamel’s office.

Things moved quickly. Ron and Hermione watched as Hermione and Flamel worked frantically to complete the preparations to reverse the Aperio. “It’s so complex,” Hermione breathed as the other Hermione and Flamel painted the triqueta onto the marble floor. “I can’t believe we even figured it out. Harry, you do know how close you came to being stuck in that world forever, don’t you?”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

The drawing completed, Harry, Lupin, and Snape stepped into their respective triangles. Flamel and Hermione had just begun to erect the layers of spells when Leila suddenly darted forward and threw her arms around Harry.

“I was wondering when that would happen,” Ron muttered.

Hermione slapped his arm. “Obviously, *Ronald*, they’re really close, or she wouldn’t have wanted to go. Think about it...she left *everything*. Her godfather, her friends, her boyfriend...”

She fell silent, watching the exchange that followed. But her mouth dropped open when Aperio-Hermione suggested the soul-binding spell.

“But that’s Dark magic!” Hermione exclaimed. “And very dangerous! I can’t believe...I mean...”

“And the time-stopping spell you performed before we came in here wasn’t dark magic? Sure,” Ron said sarcastically.

“That was different,” Hermione said defensively. “That spell doesn’t work like a Time-Turner. You can’t hurt anyone, or change the past or future. Anything you do, anywhere you go, any object you move or paper you write or spell you perform, all will be as it was when you undo the spell.”

“So what’s it good for?”

“This,” Hermione explained impatiently. “Viewing memories. Reading about things. Talking. Things that you can remember, but don’t leave a change in the world around you. Actions that only affect your memories and thoughts.”

She turned back. The soul-binding spell was almost completed. Silently, they watched Leila and Harry take their place once again in the third triangle.

“Thank you. You don’t know what this means to me,” Aperio-Harry told Aperio-Hermione before she pulled out her wand and began to cast spells.

The layers of magic grew thicker and higher and more colorful. Then just as Harry was sure not another layer would fit into the room, Hermione and Flamel cried “*Priori novo fatumetas!*”

And they vanished.

The Pensieve went black, and Harry followed Hermione’s lead, pointing his wand upward and letting it pull him out of the basin of memories, back onto reality...

Harry stumbled out of the Pensieve, gasping for breath. He reached out blindly and found the edge of the table to steady himself on. When the room stopped moving, he carefully maneuvered himself into a chair.

Hermione was shaking her head. “What a journey,” she breathed.

Ron nodded emphatically.

They sat at the table for a long time, not speaking. Harry glanced up at the clock on the wall; it was odd to see its hands still frozen on five forty-five—he knew it’d been hours since they’d entered the Pensieve.

“So,” Hermione finally said, clasping her hands. “What do we do now?”

Harry stared at the table. “I suppose we have to tell your family some of what I showed you,” he said to Ron.

“They’ll want to know, mate.”

“But not the Horcruxes.”

To his surprise, both Ron and Hermione nodded. “We won’t tell them about the Horcruxes.”

“But the rest of the Apero—do I have to explain it all?”

Hermione looked over at Ron. “Just an outline should be fine, I think,” she said softly.

“What about the other Order members?”

“We’ll need to let Shackbolt, Tonks, Diggle, McGonagall, Moody, and the others who have been looking for you that you two are back.”

“And Ginny?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged another glance. “Uh, that one we’ll let you decide, mate,” Ron said, shifting uncomfortably. “Personally, I don’t want her to get hurt just as much as you do, but there are some things she deserves to know. I know she’s not seventeen yet, so she can’t exactly go Horcrux-hunting with us, but then again, your sister’s not seventeen, and I can’t see her willingly going back to Hogwarts with Ginny...”

“But then again, there’s only one more Horcrux to find,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. “We need to find out what happened to the locket. We already know where the cup, the tiara, and the snake are.”

Harry sighed; he’d have to decide about Ginny later. He suddenly felt his eyes growing heavy. He suppressed a yawn, but Hermione noticed anyway. “You need to go back to bed, Harry,” she chided. “I’m sure you’re exhausted. Honestly, we can figure this all out later.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, go to bed, mate. Hermione can reverse the spell, and you can sneak back upstairs. When Mum gets up, we’ll just tell her you’re not awake yet. You can stay up there as long as you want, until you feel like coming down.”

Harry smiled gratefully at his friends. Once again, they knew exactly what he needed. Rest, and then time.

"Thanks, Ron, Hermione. Thanks for everything—especially for understanding... you know."

"No problem," Ron said sincerely, replying for Hermione as well. "Now go."

Author's Note: Well, there's part two for you. Expect some Harry/Ginny and most likely some Tonks/Remus in either chapter fifty-eight or fifty-nine. I think I'll end this story at chapter sixty. Sixty is a good number, I think. Oh, and I know the whole "Jeremy just up and moves to England" thing was cheesy, but I have a reason for him being here.

Edit: So sorry, I had put down Bellatrix Lestrange instead of Narcissa Malfoy as pretending to be Clark...to my surprise, in 30 reviews, only one person caught the mistake! I finished the chapter at 4 in the morning, so forgive me for my slip.

Here's the poll question of the day--answer in your review. Question: Who would you like to see Leila get together with in the sequel? A. Theodore Nott. B. Ronald Weasley (please don't get your hopes up that this will happen--i'm very much for canon pairings). C. Draco Malfoy. D. Jeremy Javan. E. Other Gryffindor, say Neville, Seamus, Colin, Dean--oh, I don't know, take your pick! F. Other Slytherin--Zabini?!?

Chapter 58

When Harry opened his eyes, Ron's room was filled with bright sunlight streaming through the attic windows. He slowly pushed himself up as his mind replayed the events of the night. The walk through the snow-covered forest, seeing the Weasleys again, the kitchen at five in the morning, the Pensieve journey with Ron and Hermione—they all seemed like a vivid dream.

Harry got out of bed and walked to the window. Outside, the weather was gorgeous. The sunlight sparkled on piles of freshly fallen snow covering every square inch of grass, trees, and bushes.

Then he saw what was written on the front lawn.

"WELCOME HOME HARRY & REMUS!" read carefully drawn snow-letters. A giant snowman with grapes for eyes, olives for buttons, and a long carrot for a nose guarded the message, his stick-arms enchanted to wave every now and then.

Harry grinned, wondering exactly whose idea it'd been to write the message. Probably Ginny's, and the twins had helped. Most likely, if he got anywhere near the snowman, it would start throwing snowballs at him.

He glanced down at his watch and whistled. It was one-thirty in the afternoon. *Merlin, I've slept late.*

In fact, Harry couldn't remember ever sleeping this late, unless he counted the times he was unconscious in the Hospital Wing with a Quidditch- or Voldemort-related injury.

He slowly dressed, picking out his favorite clothes from his trunk and trying not to think about his growling stomach. How long had it been since he'd last eaten? *Probably breakfast yesterday, he thought. Breakfast at Beauxbatons before the Death Eaters showed up and screwed it all.*

His wand was sitting on the bedside table, and he picked it up and tucked it into his pocket. Then, he slowly pulled it back out and

examined the wand. If Hermione was right, there would be two phoenix-feather wands in this world, not counting Voldemort's. Harry returned to his trunk and dug through it. He finally found the wand, lying underneath his sneak-o-scope and an old set of Quidditch robes that no longer fit. He picked it up and the handle glowed warm at his touch.

Harry examined both wands. At first glance, they were exactly the same, save for a deep chip in the handle of his first wand from the battle at the Ministry of Magic. He tested both; they each emitted the same amount of sparks, and responded the same when he performed a few simple spells. He sat back on his heels, at a loss as to which wand to choose.

The shouts from outside drew his attention to the window. Making an impulsive decision, Harry slipped his old wand into his pocket, threw the Aperi wand back into the trunk, and went to the window.

Outside on the lawn, beyond the snowman and message in the snow, war raged. On one side, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Bill were frantically forming, enchanting, and throwing snowballs at Fred, George, Charlie, and the light-haired girl Harry had seen the night before. She must have been Charlie's girlfriend, because the two were working closely together, ducking and laughing as they packed snowballs for Fred and George to enchant and send hurtling at the opposing parties.

On the other side, Ron and Bill were enchanting and throwing snowballs while Hermione and Ginny formed them. As Harry watched, one of George's snowballs hit Ginny smack in the face. The expression on her face was priceless, but it was quickly replaced by anger as she yelled something incomprehensible at him. The next thing he knew, Ginny had packed a snowball and snatched Bill's wand out of his hand. She sent the snowball hurtling at the speed of light toward the unsuspecting twin, who received a face full of enchanted snow and fell to the ground, sputtering and shouting.

Ginny handed the wand back to Bill, who was grinning proudly at his little sister. She dusted off her hands and rejoined Hermione, who

shook her head and spoke to her, most likely saying something about being underage.

When George wiped the snow off, Harry was surprised to see that his face had turned blue. And it wasn't just blue from the cold; the snowball must have been specially enchanted to leave the recipient with a mark he wouldn't soon forget.

His respect for Ginny was rapidly growing.

The fighting looked as if it was about to get dirty, but then to Harry's disappointment, Mrs. Weasley's voice echoed over the lawn, and everyone looked up. A moment later, they filed happily into the house and disappeared from view.

Even from the attic, Harry could hear the sounds of the Weasleys, Hermione, and the other girl entering the house, like a herd of elephants. Several sets of footsteps got closer, pounding up the stairs; they were probably all coming upstairs to change clothes. He moved back to his trunk and replaced all the items carefully. Just as he was putting the last set of robes on the top, the door flew open, and a very red-faced, wet Ron flew through the door.

"Oh, Harry, you're up!" he exclaimed, shrugging off his wet coat. "About time."

"Can't you give a bloke some time to sleep in?" Harry said, shaking his head.

"Sure," Ron replied, now pulling off his other wet clothes and replacing them with a dry set. "But not until 1:30 in the afternoon! Darnnit..."

"Why didn't you guys just dry out your clothes with your wands?" Harry asked.

"Fred came up with this handy little charm that makes the moisture in the snowballs become immune to drying and warming spells. Stupid git..."

"Oh."

“Mum’s just called us in for Christmas dinner,” Ron told him. “Imagine it, Christmas dinner and we haven’t even opened presents yet!”

“Why not?”

“Oh, Mum gave us this crap about waiting for you to wake up first so you could be there...”

“I really don’t care.”

“I know,” Ron said. “I told her you that, but she was adamant.”

“Well, now you can tell her that I said I don’t care.”

“But that would defeat the purpose, mate,” Ron said, grinning. “Because then she’d know that you’re awake, and the next thing you know, she’d be dragging you downstairs to eat with us...”

Harry sighed. “I guess I’d better go down for dinner.”

“Probably a good idea,” Ron said wisely. “Lupin’s anxious to talk to you too.” Then his eyes widened. “Oh, I forgot to tell you! Lupin’s awake.”

Harry scrambled up. “We’ve got to talk to him before he spills the whole story to your parents.”

“I don’t think there’s any chance of that,” Ron said. “Mum’s been quizzing him all morning, but he only shook his head and said something about wanting to wait for you to be there...”

“How’s Leila?”

Ron shrugged. “The same. Mum’s dying to call Madame Pomphery, but she hasn’t because of your request. But if we’re planning on telling the Order members that you’re back, surely it couldn’t hurt?”

Harry nodded slowly. “Maybe she could help figure out what’s wrong with Leila.”

He turned and shut the lid to the trunk. “Oh, and thanks for keeping this safe for me, mate. Hermione told me.”

Ron's ears reddened, but he grinned. "What are friends for? Come on, let's get down there before Mum drags us down by the ears."

They descended the stairs, Harry fighting back the mounting queasiness in his stomach in anticipation of seeing everyone again. But to his surprise and relief, when he entered the room, Mrs. Weasley only looked up and said, "Oh, Harry, you're up! And just in time for dinner. Perfect."

Harry threw Ron a quizzical look as the rest of the Weasleys went about their business, washing up for the meal. "This morning, Dad gave us all a lecture about treating you normally, not like an alien who'd dropped in for a visit," Ron explained, then frowned. "What's an alien, anyway?"

"Muggle term for extraterrestrial creatures," Harry said, watching Ginny set the magically-expanded table for the meal. She moved like a bird, flitting from seat to seat, straightening the silverware, folding the napkins, placing the cups in the right places...

She must have felt his eyes on her, because she looked up, then glanced away quickly. Harry felt strangely disappointed, let down in some way.

"Harry? Harry!" Ron was waving his hand in front of Harry's face.

"What?" Harry said, irritated. "I'm listening."

"Want to play a game of chess after dinner?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply that he thought a game of chess was a good idea because he'd so missed Ron beating him at every turn, but at that moment, Hermione appeared by his side.

"Oh, Harry, you're awake! I was about to give up on even seeing you today... Are you feeling better now? I hope we didn't completely wear you out last night, or shall I say this morning... Oh, I nearly forgot. Lupin's in the living room. He wants to talk to you alone, I think."

"Good to see you too, Hermione," Harry said quickly, and pushed past Ron. "Be back soon."

“Six months he disappears, and this is the greeting we get?” Ron grumbled loudly, but Harry was out of the kitchen before he heard Hermione’s reply.

Lupin was sitting in the armchair by the fire; he looked up as Harry entered and smiled.

Harry quickly crossed the room and slid into the opposite armchair.

“Morning,” the werewolf said. “Or should I say, afternoon? You’ve nearly slept the day away.”

Harry glanced around the room; fortunately, it was empty, and the noises from the kitchen made him pretty confident that they wouldn’t be overheard. Still, it never hurt to be careful.

He pulled out his wand and muttered the spell. “*Muffliato*.”

“I was tired,” Harry protested in reply to Lupin’s earlier comment. “Good grief, I woke up at five this morning—couldn’t sleep.”

Lupin merely raised one eyebrow.

“Oh, all right. I came down to the kitchen and Hermione was here, and I ended up...well, telling her everything. Her and Ron, actually.”

To Harry’s surprise, Lupin nodded. “Good. That will make things less complicated. Now, have you done any thinking about what we’ll tell everyone else?”

Harry took a breath. “Well, I think telling them about the Aperio is mandatory. Snape’s loyalties, however—I’m not sure if we should divulge that piece of information, or come up with a story to explain why he was the third.”

Lupin pursed his lips. “Why do you think it would be a bad idea to tell them?”

“Hermione told me of the Pensieve Dumbledore left to her. Inside were memories that served as proof of Snape’s loyalties, and instructions for us to keep it a secret. It seems that we weren’t the

only one Dumbledore left a task for. Snape's job was to become Voldemort's closest confidant, and then at the right time, kill the snake."

"No wonder he was anxious to get back to Voldemort," Lupin said thoughtfully. "But I really think we're going to have to tell the truth about Snape's loyalties. They will know we're lying if we try and come up with a story, and Hermione and Bill seem to know enough Aperios that they will be suspicious anyway."

Reluctantly, Harry conceded the point.

"So, we tell the Order that you and I are back," Lupin said. "We'll explain the Aperio and Snape's position, and tell them enough about the other world to appease their curiosity—the history, who was dead in that world, your rescue of Ginny, the betrayal of Clark..."

But Harry had thrown up his hands. "Whoa...you can't tell them that—I don't want them knowing about the Azkaban event."

"But then how will we explain your Animagi abilities?"

"We don't have to tell them that either."

Lupin clicked his tongue. "Don't you think the Weasleys deserve to know about Ginny's conviction and imprisonment? We're not going to lie to them about Charlie's and Bill's deaths."

But still, Harry shook his head. "I don't want them knowing." What he *really* didn't want was the attention it would bring. He shuddered at the thought of a crowd of Weasleys pressing in around him to thank him for his bravery... He didn't want their thanks, praise, or anything else. He'd made his decision to rescue Ginny the moment he'd asked Sirius to teach him to be an Animagi and hadn't once regretted it. Seeing the other Ginny alive and well had been all the reward he needed.

Lupin was silent. "Alright," he finally said. "Whatever you say. So we'll tell them everything except the Horcrux information and Ginny's imprisonment."

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Is it too much to ask... I mean, I really don't want to..."

Lupin looked sympathetic. "I'll do the talking."

Harry sighed in relief. "Thanks."

Mrs. Weasley appeared in the doorway. "If you two are ready, it's time to eat," she said.

When Harry entered the kitchen again, most of the family was there. All but George, anyway, who was probably still trying to get the blue off of his face.

"Where *is* your brother?" Mrs. Weasley snapped at Fred. "Go and get him, please."

Fred disappeared, and Harry took a good look around the room. Bill and Fleur were standing in the corner, arms wrapped around each other. Hermione and Ron were bickering over something trivial, while Ginny played referee. Mrs. Weasley was leaning over the stove, while Mr. Weasley talked animatedly with Charlie. Closest to Harry stood the light-haired girl, looking a little uncomfortable. She moved a little closer and stuck out a hand.

"I'm Amanda," she said, and Harry shook her hand. For someone so delicate-looking, she had a strong handshake.

"Harry Potter," he said. "Nice to meet you. Are you Charlie's...uh, girlfriend?"

She grinned. "You could say that. Or maybe he was just being nice when he invited me home for Christmas... After all, I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"So, do you work in Romania?"

She nodded. "With the dragons, like Charlie."

They fell silent, but then Amanda looked over shyly. "So, is that girl in the next room your sister?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Have you seen her?"

"I was with her for a couple hours this morning."

"How is she?"

Amanda shrugged. "She seems to be in some kind of magical coma. I'm sure she'll come out of it, though. We'd need a trained Healer to take a look at her to be sure. But I'm positive she's in no immediate danger."

Harry let out his breath, feeling several muscles in his shoulders relax. Just then, George slunk into the kitchen, Fred behind him.

"You're finally here," Mrs. Weasley chided, her back still turned. Then she turned around. "George Rudolph Weasley! What happened to your face?"

Shooting a dangerous glare at Ginny, George opened his mouth, but Ginny got there first. "Bill did it," she blurted out. "But I'm sure you can get it off, can't you, Mum?"

"I'll try," Mrs. Weasley said, pulling out her wand and looking disapprovingly at her oldest son. George wordlessly gaped at his sister, and she smirked at him from behind Mrs. Weasley's shoulder. Bill glared at her too, but Charlie patted him on the back sympathetically and he looked a little less irked.

Harry shook his head. Ginny was certainly spoiled by her oldest brothers.

After finally admitting defeat and telling George he'd have to visit Madam Pomphrey to get the spell damage reversed or fix it himself, Mrs. Weasley clapped her hands. "Gather round, gather round..." she called, and everyone found seats at the long table. Harry found himself wedged between Hermione and Fred. Lupin was sitting next to Mr. Weasley, and Ginny had slipped in between her two oldest brothers. Harry was suddenly struck by the feeling of emptiness in the room without Percy. Sure, the Percy in this world was a git, but now Harry was positive that beneath the layers of cold masks, Percy somehow still cared about his family.

“Attention,” Mr. Weasley called, tapping her glass. “Another Christmas has come, and I must say, I never expected to see some of the same faces at the table as last year. We are very thankful for your safe return to us, Remus and Harry.”

Mrs. Weasley beamed at Harry.

“A toast to being reunited once again,” Mr. Weasley said, raising his glass.

Harry clinked his glass with Fred, took a long draught of pumpkin juice, and smiled. The only way he could feel more content right now was if he knew Leila was awake and well...but she'd recover. He had the gut feeling that everything was going to be alright. Somehow.

“Pass the mashed potatoes,” Hermione said, and Harry complied.

The meal proceeded without confrontation. George was the butt of quite a few jokes regarding his blue face; Mrs. Weasley was complemented on her superb cooking skills; and Charlie told several funny stories regarding his experiences in Romania, with Amanda adding the parts he left out.

Presently, Lupin set down his glass and said quietly, “Arthur, do you and Molly mind if I call an Order meeting this afternoon?”

Instantly, conversation ceased, and the atmosphere changed. Harry was pretty sure that everyone had been waiting for this topic to come up.

“Certainly,” Mr. Weasley said carefully. “Might I inquire as to what for?”

“Of course,” Lupin said politely. “Harry and I have agreed that it is not fair to keep the other members in the dark regarding our current circumstances.”

“Then it's settled,” Mr. Weasley said. “I'll Floo everyone after the meal is finished.”

The topic was dropped, but Harry knew it was still on everyone's mind as the meal concluded. The table was cleared, the food was put away, and slowly everyone migrated into the living room, where Mr. Weasley was using Floo powder to call every Order member who wasn't out of town. Slowly, they began arriving.

It was almost like watching a Muggle sitcom, seeing all the shocked expressions of the Order members as they climbed out of the fireplace and found Harry and Lupin sitting calmly on the couch. Dedalus Diggle gave a loud squeak and nearly toppled to the floor before Mrs. Weasley gently led him to the kitchen. Arabella Figg merely squinted at him when she appeared. "Where've you been, boy? Up to trouble, I'm sure."

Mad-Eye Moody had his wand out the second he'd regained his balance from the Floo ride, demanding that Harry and Lupin answer dozens of questions to verify their identities. McGonagall gasped and looked faint; fortunately, Bill was watching and quickly pushed a chair behind her, which she gratefully collapsed into.

"Right then," Mr. Weasley finally said, looking around. "That's about it, I think. Kingsley, Mad-Eye, Minerva, Dedalus, Poppy, Arabella... Hestia isn't home, probably visiting her sister in Chicago for the holidays. As always, I can't reach Hagrid, and Sturgis isn't answering his fire either. Mundungus...well, no explanation needed."

A few people chuckled, but most were still gaping at Harry and Lupin. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, wondering how Lupin managed to take all this so calmly.

"Anyone else missing? I'm sure they'll be along presently..."

Harry looked around. All the Weasleys were there, as well as Amanda and Hermione. Fleur, he knew, was sitting with Leila, having volunteered to get the information from Bill later. But still, there seemed to be someone missing...only Harry couldn't figure out who.

"Now, to all of you who aren't in the Order," Mr. Weasley continued, sending a foreboding look at his younger children, Hermione, and Amanda, "this information is extremely confidential. If you value your life, you will not be sharing it with anyone under any circumstance."

They nodded solemnly, but just then a puff of green smoke announced the arrival of one last Order member. Harry turned to see who it was, and froze.

Tonks stood in the fading cloud of Floo powder, looking confused as she took in the crowd of Order members. Then her eyes fell upon Lupin, and her face paled.

“Remus?” she whispered.

Lupin half-rose from his chair. “Nymphadora? Is that you?” he said, looking dazed.

Tonks was as still as a statue, her mouth partly open. Then she blinked, and her face coloured quickly. Before Harry even realised it, she was striding across the room, her face set...

Smack.

Lupin reeled back, eyes wide as a red mark rapidly formed on his left cheek. “What was that for?” he asked, his voice rising a little. “Good god, Nymphadora, is that any way to greet someone you haven’t seen in months?”

“*That* was for disappearing like that, *Remus*,” she cried, shaking her finger in his face and glaring at him.

Lupin looked incredulous. “You think I vanished on purpose? You’ve got it all wrong! I’m telling you, it wasn’t my doing. You must listen to reason!”

“I don’t want to listen to reason! I want answers; I want to know why you’d leave me like that...”

“I told you, I didn’t mean...”

“Like hell you didn’t,” she snarled. “I’m sure you had fun on your *vacation*, Remus, but do you have any idea what you put me—us—through while you were out gallivanting around the country? Or wherever else you went? You don’t know what I felt...hoping, praying, wishing, wondering, waking up each morning not knowing if you were

dead or alive or something in between...whether you'd been captured or if you'd just run away from it all... Did you run away, Remus? Don't you think that we wish we could just vanish and leave it all behind too, sometimes? But you don't see Kingsley running away from his problems, or Moody, or Arthur, or Minerva, or any of them!"

Remus started to speak, but Tonks cut him off. "I'm not finished yet! And what did you do with Harry? Do you have any idea what we went through when we found both of you missing? We looked for months, Remus, *months!* No clues, no nothing. Even your wands were left here. Where did you go? What happened?"

"Tonks, I said, I'll explain everything!" Lupin shouted. "Will you just listen to me for one bleeding minute?"

"Listen?" She shrieked with laughter. "You expect me to listen? How can I listen to you after what you did?" To Harry's surprise, faint tears began to streak their way down her cheeks. "You don't know...how could you know? Months of waiting, watching, looking... We looked for anything—a scrap of clothing, a body part, a strand of hair...anything to give us clues of what had happened to you..."

Tonks began to pace. "So if you think your disappearance didn't affect us, you're wrong. *WRONG*. Do you have any idea what I went through? Oh god, Remus, I was so worried...so scared..."

Her tears were falling even more freely now. Lupin took one brave step forward and reached out, gently touching her arm. "You know I didn't leave you here on purpose," he said quietly.

Tonks sniffed loudly and wiped her sleeve across her face. "Merlin, Remus, I know that. I know you wouldn't have done that on purpose..." She suddenly blinked and glanced around the room, as if suddenly realising that the whole Order was witnessing her outburst. She turned back to Remus. "God, I've messed this all up. Here I am, yelling at you in front of everyone, when all I really wanted to do is this..."

And before Remus could react, she'd thrown herself into his arms and kissed him, full on the lips.

Harry's jaw dropped. He definitely hadn't been expecting *that*. Looking around, he found the others wearing equally shocked expressions. His attention turned back to Lupin and Tonks. Lupin, having finally recovered from the first shock, had pulled Tonks closer to him and was now kissing her gently back. They didn't break apart until Fred and George began whistling and catcalling, only to be stopped by several whacks applied to the backs of their heads by a teary-eyed Mrs. Weasley.

Harry dove out of the way as Remus gently pushed Tonks down onto the sofa beside him, grasping her hand tightly. There was only one seat left in the room and Harry headed for it before he'd realised that the empty seat was next to Ginny.

She courteously slid over to make room for Harry on the bench, but pointedly avoided his gaze. Harry shifted uncomfortably, wondering what it would take to break the tension that had been building ever since the night before. He really wasn't sure what to do about Ginny, but now was not the time to be thinking about that...

"Well," Arthur Weasley said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his forehead with a handkerchief. "Shall we get started?"

Author's Note: I'm proud to announce the beginnings of a diversion story from chapter 22 called *Rebuilding the World...* What if Ginny had been the third person in the Aperio? How would have things been different? What if Lupin and Harry had never left the Aperio world? Go to the profile page and check it out! The story starts as the cell door is swinging open at Azkaban...but Harry doesn't see what he expected. *Edit: The story isn't showing up on my profile page yet, so I've posted the link in my bio section. Sorry for the inconvenience.*

Wow. I honestly have no idea how these chapters come to me... I sit down to write one, and things just come to me as I'm typing. Like the snowball fight, the whole dinner scene...well, most everything in this chapter except the Tonks/Lupin scene. Did you like? I'm sorry--i keep promising Ginny/Harry, but it wasn't the right time yet. Much as I'd like to write a Harry/Ginny she-slaps-him/he-kisses-her/everything-is-fine scene, they are too cliched, and I believe in keeping characters as canon as possible. Don't worry...i have a great Harry/Ginny fluff

scene planned for next chapter--(this time I'm serious)--and I think you all will enjoy it.

Chapter 59

Happy Thanksgiving a little early! And for the grand finale...

The room grew quiet as Lupin cleared his throat. "Welcome," he said. "It's good to see you after so many months of absence."

A buzz of conversation began once again, and the werewolf waited until they were silent again. "I apologize for calling a meeting at such an inconvenient time...And as you can all see, not everyone was able to attend. But we—Harry and I, that is—thought that you deserved an immediate explanation for our unconventional absence."

Beside him, Tonks blushed, but Lupin only quizzed her hand tighter as he continued. "But before I begin, there is one thing I need to be sure of. What I am going to ask you all to do may seem unnecessary and harsh, but I assure you, once you hear my story, you will quite agree that is the correct thing to do."

Several people shifted uncomfortable, looking questioningly at each other.

"I want us each to swear under the influence of Veritiserum that we are in fact who we say we are, that we are not in any way in the service of Lord Voldemort or planning to be in the future."

Surprisingly enough, after a little discussion, everyone agreed. Especially after Harry brought up the incident from his fourth year involving Barty Crouch and too much Polyjuice. Lupin produced some of the truth serum potion, and handed it to Arthur Weasley, who in turn placed a couple of drops on Lupin's tongue. Instantly the werewolf's eyes clouded over.

"What is your name?"

"Remus Lupin."

"Are you in the service of Voldemort, or do you ever plan to be?"

"No."

The Veritiserum continued around the circle.

"Give me six drops," Mad-Eye instructed when Mr. Weasley reached him with the bottle. "I've developed a resistance over the years."

Finally the bottle reached Harry. He willingly tilted his head back and opened his mouth to allow Mr. Weasley to pour the drops in. Instantly, a warm drowsy feeling engulfed him. He was floating on a mist of blissful peacefulness. "What's your name?" a soft, sweet voice said.

"Harry James Potter," Harry replied without a thought.

"Are you in the service of Voldemort, or do you ever plan to be?"

"No."

Slowly the effects wore off, and his mind cleared. Harry's head ached, and his stomach roiled from the potion. "It's hard the first time, boy," Mad-Eye said gruffly as the potion was passed on to Ginny, Hermione, and Ron, all who were throwing nervous glances at the vial.

Harry held his stomach and tried to keep his dinner down as Mr. Weasley tipped a few drops into Ginny's mouth. Her eyes went blank, and she answered the questions. Harry suddenly had the unexplainable urge to ask her other questions, questions that he wouldn't dare ask in front of the Order and the Weasleys. Questions like, do you still have feelings for me at all? Or did you find someone else while I was gone?

He banished the thoughts from his mind. He was being childish, but something inside of him was desperate to know. Despite Hermione and Ron being his best friends, it'd been Ginny he'd missed the most. It'd been her that he'd thought of when he saw the Aperio Ginny looking like death itself, huddled in the cell in Azkaban. It'd been her he'd remembered as he saw the Aperio Ginny recovering at Grimmauld Place, thin and hardly strong enough to sit up in bed. It'd been her he'd wished for when the Aperio Ginny had kissed him in the bedroom at Castaway Cottage.

The Order meeting seemed to last forever. Mercifully, Lupin kept his promise and did almost all the talking. The witches and wizards congregated made a good audience, laughing and gasping at all the right places. Mrs. Weasley was distressed to discover that Charlie was dead in the other world, and Tonks looked a little perturbed as well. Lupin didn't mention that the two had been engaged at the time.

Harry looked pointedly at the floor as Lupin related the events of the day Voldemort had discovered the Order's plans regarding the Horcruxes. He vaguely heard the gasps and felt the stares burning into him as Lupin recited his parents' names from the list of dead.

But even louder was Mrs. Weasley's gasp when Bill's name was read. Surprisingly enough, neither of the two eldest Weasleys seemed to be taking the news badly. "At least in the other world we're in the afterlife together," Charlie joked, punching his older brother, who grinned, but still looked just a little uncomfortable.

The biggest reaction of all, however, came when Lupin related Snape's true loyalties and role in the Apero and the truth behind Dumbledore's death. At first, they thought Lupin was lying. Then came disbelief, and finally shock mixed with slow acceptance.

"But he murdered Dumbledore," Hestia said for the hundredth time, looking dazed.

"On Dumbledore's orders," Lupin insisted, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief Tonks had provided.

Harry rubbed his temples. How long would this take? Already the meeting had been going for an hour. He just wanted to leave. He didn't want to talk about the Apero any more, or his parents, or Sirius, or Snape, or the imprisonment he and Lupin had endured...

Next to him, Ginny threw him a tentative glance, but looked away quickly, and Harry wondered what she was thinking. He was positive that she knew he was keeping things from her. Was that why she was being so distant? Had she already seen right through his façade and made her decision to forget about what they'd once had...months and months ago? Or even worse, what if she'd picked up things with Dean or Michael or another bloke at Hogwarts?

Harry banished these thoughts from his head. Leila. He should be thinking about Leila right now. He desperately wanted to see how she was doing, wanted to know that she'd pull through and be alright.

Lupin began to talk about how they'd met up with Hermione and Flamel at Beaubaxtons, then about the Death Eaters' appearance and the reversal of the Aperio. He was just reaching the point when Leila had refused to stay when there was a noise at the door.

Harry looked up. Fleur was there, her eyes wide. "What is it?" Moody asked, standing. His hand automatically went to his wand holster at his side.

But Fleur paid no attention to him. "Arry, eets your sister. She eez awake."

Ignoring the outbursts of gasps and whispers, Harry bolted to his feet and was through to the door in only a matter of seconds. Fleur stepped aside and let him pass. Down the hall and to the left was the smaller drawing room. Harry skidded to a stop in the doorway.

His sister was lying on the makeshift cot, her head propped up by pillows. Her eyes fluttered open. "Hey," Leila said softly, a tiny smile curling the edges of her mouth.

"Hey," Harry said, suddenly finding it hard to speak.

"So, are you just going to stand there?" Leila asked after a long pause.

"Sorry," Harry said, quickly crossing the room and sitting in the armchair next to the cot. "How are you?"

Leila slowly pushed herself into a sitting position, grimacing as she did so. "Alright, I guess. My head feels like I got run over by the Knight Bus."

Harry chuckled. "That bad, huh?"

She shrugged. "I'll survive. So where are we, anyway?"

“The Burrow. Did Fleur say anything?”

“No, because as soon as she saw I was wake, she bolted from the room. And I was too busy recovering from the shock of seeing her alive to ask questions... Merlin, Harry, you could have at least warned me!”

“Sorry,” Harry said, feeling the blood rush to his face. “I thought you knew.”

Leila sulked for only a moment before sighing. “You’re forgiven.” She swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

“Wait, where do you think you’re going?” Harry said, gaping at her. “You can’t leave. You’re still sick!”

“I’m fine!” she insisted. But her legs were trembling.

“Get back in bed. Now.”

“The sooner I get up, the sooner I’ll feel better!” Leila protested, but she sank back against the pillows. “OK, OK. I’ll rest for a little bit. But then I want to see the rest of the Burrow.”

Harry frowned. “But...”

“I’ve only been here once,” she explained, “the night that Pettigrew was exposed. So, is anyone else alive that I should know about?”

Harry thought. “Uh, Bill. Kingsley. Hagrid, Arabella Figg. Dedalus Diggle, Sturgis Podmore. Tonks and Charlie.”

Leila’s face lit up, and she pushed herself up again. “Tonks? Are you serious? Out of all the Order members, she was my favorite. She always talked to me when Order meetings were held at our house. I can’t believe it...it almost feels like Christmas.”

“It is Christmas,” Harry reminded her, but she wasn’t listening. Her face had gotten a faraway look.

“Tonks and Charlie were the cutest couple...”

“Well, Lupin and Tonks are together now,” Harry said flatly.

Leila frowned. “Since when?”

“Since an hour ago,” he replied. He should have known that the first thing she’d be concerned about was the relationship statuses. “You missed a great shouting match ending with a disgusting snog.”

“And what about you and Ginny?”

There was a long silence. “I don’t want to talk about it,” Harry finally said, a little too sharply.

“Fine, fine, get all defensive,” Leila snapped. “Is Tonks still there? I want to see her. I’m feeling much better now.”

“No,” Harry began, but it was useless. Leila pushed herself up, winced, and started for the door.

“You can’t go out there!” Harry protested, blocking the door.

“Watch me,” she said stubbornly.

“But...”

He was cut off by a simple look. One of these days, Harry vowed he’d learn the secret of conveying everything that needed to be said in a glance. Like Snape. And Lupin, come to think of it. His mother had been especially good at the skill.

Harry held up his hands in defeat. “Fine. But change first.”

Leila looked down. “Oh. OK. Turn around.”

He did, and studied the grains of wood on the door as the rustling behind him kept him informed of her progress. “OK, ready,” Leila finally said.

She’d put on some of Ginny’s clothes that had been lying next to the door. Harry recognized one of Ginny’s pink t-shirts and a pair of jeans.

“Whose are these, anyway?” Leila asked, inspecting the shirt. Harry opened his mouth to answer, but suddenly she swayed.

He was at her side in an instant, supporting her elbow. “I’m fine,” Leila insisted, but her face was paler.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Harry said firmly.

But she had spotted a purple potion on the dresser. “Look, I’ll just take this,” Leila said, draining the vial before Harry could snatch it out of her hands. “See? Much better.”

Finally admitting defeat, Harry sighed. “All right, all right. But after the potion wears off, you’re going back to bed.”

“Agreed. Can we please go?”

Harry let her lead the way to the hall. With the Strengthening Solution, she was steady on her feet and needed no assistance.

Halfway down the hall, Harry suddenly realised who was waiting in the living room. “Uh, Leila?”

“What?”

“I, uh, kinda forgot to tell you, but...”

It was too late. She reached the doorway, and froze. Harry stopped beside her, and surveyed the room full of gawking Order members.

“...the Order is here,” he finished.

“Yeah, I can see that. Thanks for the warning,” she whispered. “What do I do?”

Fortunately, Lupin took the initiative. Clearing his throat, he stood. “Welcome, Leila. You look like you’re feeling better.”

Harry headed for the bench, and Leila followed. Ginny moved, still not making eye contact with him, and settled herself on the rug at Charlie’s feet.

“She’s acting a little cold, don’t you think?” Leila said in a low voice as she and Harry made themselves comfortable on the bench. “Ginny, I mean.”

“End of conversation,” Harry warned, and she rolled her eyes.

“So,” Mrs. Weasley said, looking uncomfortable, “Leila, is it?”

Harry’s sister nodded, flashing a smile in Mrs. Weasley’s direction.

“So, I’m Molly, and this is Arthur. Next to him is Kingsley Shacklebolt...”

“Thanks, but I already know everyone,” Leila interrupted, only making Mrs. Weasley look even more uncomfortable. “Of course it’s been a while since I last saw Tonks and Charlie...but I think I still remember all the names.”

Lupin shifted in his seat, and Harry wondered if anyone had made the connection yet that Tonks and Charlie’s deaths at the same time in the Aperio world hadn’t been coincidental.

Harry nudged Leila. “That’s Amanda.” The light-haired girl waved.

“And you’ve met Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.”

Leila smiled at them, and they each in return smiled nervously back. She turned to Harry. “Where is Hestia?”

“In Chicago.”

“And Kiara?”

Harry shrugged. “Not in the Order in this world.”

“What about the Longbottoms?”

The room tensed. “Uh...” Harry said, feeling again as if someone had socked him in the stomach. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Diggle?”

“Diggle is dead.”

“Right,” she said bitterly. “Along with Mum, Dad, Sirius, Regulus... Anyone else I should know about?”

“I think that’s it.”

The room was quiet; the Order members had been listening to their conversation. Then McGonagall cleared her throat. “My dear girl, did anyone ever tell you how much you look like Lily?”

Leila looked startled. “Really?” she said in a small voice.

“Really. It’s almost like having her here with us again.”

Harry studied his sister. Now that he thought about it, she did resemble Lily. A lot. The intensely green eyes, the slender face, the long eyelashes. The only difference was in hair colour—Leila’s hair had never made up its mind whether it was red or black, resulting in a combination of the two.

Lupin shifted in his seat. “So, as I was saying, Harry decided to let Leila come with us...”

“I didn’t give him much choice,” Leila interjected, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“But how could that be possible?” Bill said, looking puzzled. “It sounds as if the spell Flamel used was designed for only three.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged uncomfortable glances, first with each other, and then with Lupin.

“Actually...” Lupin began, but Leila got there first.

“Hermione—the other Hermione, not this one—used an ancient spell to bind my life force to his. Then she modified the spell to allow me to come along.”

“But that’s completely illegal and horrendously dangerous!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, glaring at Hermione as if it was her fault.

"This changes everything," McGonagall said, her voice rising a pitch. "Remus, how could you allow them to do this? Do you know what this means?"

"It wasn't his choice," Leila told her. "It was mine. And Harry's. I knew the consequences and risks, but it was the only thing we could do! He couldn't have made the spell work properly without knowing that he wouldn't have to leave me behind, and there was nothing left for me in that world."

"But if he is killed..."

Harry was feeling worse and worse. In allowing Leila to come, he knew that he'd practically signed her death sentence. But she was right; the spell required that all three members want to return to the original reality.

And he couldn't even begin to express how much better he felt having his sister by his side. "Family," Hagrid had once said. "Whatever yeh say, blood's important..." Harry knew it to be true. There was a bond between them that could never be broken, not by a fight, or estrangement, or anything. Because no matter what happened, they'd always be siblings.

"What's done is done, and you're just going to have to live with it," Leila was saying. She stared down each of the Order members before finally turning back to Harry.

He shrugged. "Yeah, what she said. Deal with it."

Lupin gave him a small smile before clearing his throat. "Are there any more questions...?"

Leila leaned against Harry's shoulder. "Are you OK?" he whispered, worrying that the Strengthening Solution was finally wearing off.

"I'm fine," she insisted, sending him a tired smile. "Don't worry about me."

"What are your plans, Harry?" Moody was saying.

Harry was saved from an uncomfortable lie by Mrs. Weasley, who had noticed Leila's fatigue. "That's it," she said loudly, standing and clapping her hands. "Out, everyone out. That's enough for one day. I'm sure Harry and Leila are still very tired, as well as Remus... You can come back another day and ask them your questions, but I want everyone to leave now."

With only minimal grumbling, the Order members slowly cleared the room, some heading for the fire, others heading for the front door to Apparate away. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny remained, keeping their distance, but throwing curious glances at Leila.

Harry beckoned them over. "She doesn't bite," he encouraged.

Rolling his eyes, Ron pulled his chair closer. "Well, if she's anything like you, mate..."

Harry swung at his friend, but missed. Hermione giggled and joined the group. Ginny followed, just a little more slowly.

"Everyone, this is Leila."

Leila grinned. "Hey, Ron, Ginny, Hermione."

Hermione shyly reached out to shake Leila's hand. "This is weird," she admitted. "It's the feeling that you know me, but I don't know you, and for some reason I feel like I should."

"So we're in the same boat," Leila said comfortingly. "I should know you—you're Harry's best friends, after all, and he's told me so much about you—but all I know is the Aperio world where Ron's a prat—"

"That hasn't changed," Ginny mumbled.

"—Hermione's a miniature version of Fleur Delacour, only smarter—"

"That's...different," Ginny commented, her eyebrows shooting up.

"And Ginny didn't go to Hogwarts because...Ow, Harry!"

Harry had stomped on her foot. "Sorry, accident," he said, shooting daggers at her with his eyes. "Ginny was sick, remember? Some kind of chronic disease that kept her out of school."

After a long stare down, Leila finally nodded. "That's right. You were sick, Ginny, which is why I never really got to know you."

She suddenly frowned. "Someone was missing. Harry, where's Percy?"

Ginny and Ron froze. Hermione suddenly became very interested in her fingernails.

"Percy...uh, he..."

"Just deserted the family because he believed the Ministry over Harry," Ron spat. "He's the world's greatest git."

Leila's face fell. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "He was...well, not nice, but different in the Aperio world. Maybe he'll come around."

"And maybe the sun will rise in the west tomorrow, and all the Death Eaters will surrender peacefully," Ginny said sarcastically.

Next to Harry, Leila swayed. He steadied her. "Potion wearing off?"

Pale faced, she nodded. "I...I don't know if..."

"I'll help you back to bed."

The next few days were quiet. The Order members, surprisingly enough, kept their distance, all except for Madame Pomphrey, who insisted on staying until Leila was completely recovered. Lupin insisted that he'd overstayed his welcome and left, despite Mrs. Weasley's protests, but only after promising Harry he'd be back to discuss...well, things. Later. To Harry's relief, there were no more visions, no more insights into Voldemort's head. He was better off without them, no matter how darn useful they could be sometimes.

For the first few days, he spent every waking minute at Leila's side, until she told him in plain words to stop hovering over her and to go catch up with his friends. With mixed emotions, Harry went; he felt inclined to stay with her until she recovered, her being his sister and all, but on the other hand, she asked him way too many regarding his relationship with Ginny, questions he didn't have answers for.

It was good to spend time with Ron and Hermione again. Hermione firmly insisted that there be no talk of Horcrux hunting or destroying Voldemort—the grimmer subjects could wait for a few days—so they spent their hours together swapping stories, playing games, or just sitting in companionable silence.

Ginny was strangely absent most of the time, and Harry could only assume that she was avoiding him. He wasn't sure what was wrong, but he desperately wanted to know what had created the uncomfortable barrier that had been erected between them. Was it the fact that the last time he'd seen her he'd broken up with her? Or was it something else?

Harry desperately wanted to ask her what was wrong, but he instead found himself studiously avoiding her. Ron and Hermione mercifully hadn't said anything yet, but Harry saw the meaningful glances they exchanged whenever Harry and Ginny were in the same room.

Then one afternoon Ron invited Harry to play a little three-on-three Quidditch. Ginny declined, muttering an excuse Harry couldn't make out, and Leila was unfortunately still bedridden. The teams were therefore equal: Bill, Harry, and Fred against George, Ron, and Charlie. The two eldest Weasleys grudgingly agreed to play Chasers, and somehow Harry got left with the remaining Keeper position after the twins had raced for the bats and Bludgers.

He didn't do as badly as he'd expected; something from his Leila-taught lessons at the end of last summer had remained. Ron was even impressed, but Harry's new skills didn't save him from losing spectacularly with Bill and Fred. Ron was just too good.

Red faced and feeling better than he'd felt in days, Harry burst through the front doors hauling his broom along and headed down

the hall to check on his sister, who had been complaining of acute boredom a few hours earlier.

“Leila, you’ve got to start helping me learn Keeping again,” he began as he barged into her room. And skidded to a halt.

Leila was sitting on the bed, drinking tea; the cup froze halfway to her mouth as her eyes widened. In the chair next to her was Ginny, who hadn’t even looked over at Harry. He could tell, though that she was angry, maybe furious, by her stiff posture. Slowly, she set her teacup down, rose to her full height, only an inch shorter than Harry, and turned.

With a clatter, Harry’s broom slipped from his fingers and landed against the wall. “H-hi, G-Ginny,” he said, then lost his nerve. “Leila, *what did you say?*”

“Only things you should have been telling me from the beginning,” Ginny replied, her voice icy. “So tell me, Harry, when were you planning on telling me the truth? Never?”

“Actually,” Harry gulped, but she didn’t let him continue.

“I always knew there were things that you kept from me, Harry, but this...this is...”

“Unforgivable?” Harry filled in timidly.

“Inexcusable is the word I was thinking of. God, this is too much. We were in a *relationship*. Maybe the word meant absolutely nothing to you—at least that’s the way you’re acting right now—but there are unwritten rules about friends telling friends things! You thought you were just going to skip over the biggest part of your story—the part that concerned me?”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He rounded on Leila again. “Leila Annette Potter, *tell me what you told her.*”

“Only the Azkaban story,” Leila said calmly.

“Not about the...?”

“Horcruxes?” Ginny finished.

“Leila!”

“I didn’t say anything!”

Ginny tossed her hair and crossed her arms. “You and my prat of a brother and Hermione are just stupid some times. You can’t honestly believe that the closest confidant of the owners of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes wouldn’t be able to find out a little secret like Horcruxes. Me, the owner of dozens of Extendable Ears and even more ways of eavesdropping than you could ever think of? You’ve got to be kidding.”

Harry gaped at her. “When did you find out?”

“Last April. But the Horcruxes aren’t important right now!”

“They aren’t?”

“No!” She sighed in exasperation, and Harry noticed that she was fortunately loosing a little of her steam. “The point is that you saved my life—again—and didn’t even tell me about it!”

Harry suddenly had the odd unexplainable urge to laugh. The situation was ironic, if not almost completely implausible.

“Ginny…”

“No, Harry, I *refuse* to listen to your pathetic excuses! Didn’t you think I’d want to know? That my *family* would want to know? Didn’t you even consider the possibility that we might want to thank you for what you did? The idea that my family and I might be *grateful* just never crossed your mind? *Why didn’t you tell us?*”

“For this very reason!” Harry exclaimed, finally loosing his patience. “If I had told your family and the Order at the meeting on Christmas Day, I know what would have happened. First your mum would have burst into tears and your dad would have shaken my hand and told me how grateful he was. Then everyone else would have been like, Aww, Harry played the hero again. Sure, it was stupid, but Harry

rescued Ginny so let's just sing his praises. I've already gone through all that before, Ginny. Your entire family and most of the Order members lined up in Sirius's living room to tell me how brave I was and how proud they were, and I didn't want that again. I've been thanked. Merlin, Ginny, do you think I did it to be patted on the back and congratulated? *No*. Can't you see that I just want to be treated like a normal person? That I don't want to make a big deal? I already caused a stir just by showing up at your doorstep; I don't want to add to that. It's better this way; they don't need to find out."

Somehow in the course of his speech, Leila had slipped out. Harry inwardly cursed her—he didn't want to be left alone here with Ginny. Nothing seemed to be coming out of this conversation anyway, nothing besides a bunch of yelling.

"And what about me?" Ginny asked, narrowing her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Harry rubbed his temples, closing his eyes for a moment. Why *had* he kept the information from her? The answer was complicated. "Partly for the same reason. I didn't want your gratitude."

"And...?" she pressed.

"And I didn't want things to change," Harry admitted, not meeting her eyes.

She laughed harshly. "Change? You thought that things would change by telling me about Azkaban?" Ginny looked as if she wanted to say something else, but she checked herself, taking a deep breath. "How, Harry?"

He shrugged, still drawing circles in the carpet with the toe of his trainer. "I don't know. I thought it might...complicate things..." Harry sighed. "I didn't think the Azkaban incident was really relative to us, now... It was in the Aperio world, and that world is gone. It doesn't really mean anything..."

"Idiot," she said, her cheeks a stunning shade of red Harry had only ever seen Ron achieve before. "Of *course* it means something! It means that every one of my doubts was wrong, that every single fear

was ungrounded. *It means you might still think of me as more than a friend.*"

Harry, who had been planning his next retort, wasn't at all ready for Ginny's last words. His words died on in his throat as he simply gaped at her, utterly shocked.

It looked as if Ginny hadn't expected herself to say that either. She stared back, wearing an equally stricken expression.

"Say that again," Harry finally whispered, locking her with his eyes, holding on to the last shred of hope he had that she might still be interested in him. If she was...

"I said, it means you might still think of me as more than a friend," Ginny whispered. "But the question still remains, Harry, do you?"

Time seemed to stand still. Slowly, Harry nodded.

Ginny took a tiny step closer. "Do you mean it?"

Half of Harry was telling him to deny his feelings, to tell her that he'd been mistaken, and he didn't like her after all. She'd be safer staying as far away from him as possible.

But the other half of him was taking charge right now. It didn't help that he was becoming lost in her luminous brown eyes. "Yes."

She took a step closer, and somehow the reasoning part of Harry's nearly dysfunctional brain kicked in. "But Ginny..."

"Stop," she murmured, putting a finger over his mouth. "I don't want to listen to your excuses." She placed her other hand on his shoulder and Harry felt chills race down his back.

With the last ounce of self-control he had, he gently grasped her wrists and pushed her away. "I'm not giving you a choice. Ginny, the people I'm close to always seem to end up dead...and I can't go through that again...I can't have you risking your life just because you like me."

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again, Harry. I. Don't. Care. V-Voldemort...he probably already knows... There were tons of people at school last year, tons of Slytherins who were practically Death Eaters... Voldemort probably had spies. The whole school knew we were dating. Do you really think that Voldemort's going to target me any less if he knows we're not together? Harry, I'm a Weasley. I was practically born with a target on my back, the way my parents oppose the Pureblood regime here in Britain. Don't you understand? I'm safer here...next to you."

He wanted to believe it... But still...

Harry turned away. "If you want to take that chance, I'm not going to stop you, Ginny. But first, you've got to think about it. You're making a rash decision. I don't want you to end up like Cedric, my mum and dad, Sirius, Bill and Charlie...and all the other Order members in the Apero who died because of my stupidity."

"But..."

"That's my final answer," Harry said firmly. "Think about it, Ginny. Just think about it."

And he determinedly forced himself to walk out of the room. But it didn't keep him from feeling like he'd left a piece of his heart behind. He'd left it there with the slender red-head standing frozen in the middle of the room.

The darkening sky was cold and clear above. The snowfall had stopped earlier that day, leaving another half meter of fresh snow on the ground. It was chilly, sitting on the front step of the Burrow, but Harry wasn't thinking about the temperature. He leaned against the railing and watched the stars coming out slowly.

The wind picked up, and Harry shivered, pulling his coat and scar closer. He had pointedly avoided all of the Weasleys that afternoon, a trick that wasn't easily achieved, especially when there were eight in the house. Mercifully, Leila hadn't asked questions about the conversation she'd missed. Ginny...well, she had simply disappeared.

He sighed. He wasn't sure how he should have handled the confrontation, but the correct procedure probably wasn't anything like what he'd said and done. If only he had a Time-Turner... If only he hadn't admitted that he still liked her, maybe she'd be more inclined to stay away from him.

He couldn't stand to lose someone else he cared about.

Harry was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't hear the door open and close behind him, and he didn't feel Ginny settle lightly next to him on the step. He did, however, feel the hand that slipped through his arm as she slid closer to him.

"Ginny..."

"Shut up, Harry," Ginny said, and turning, he found that she was smiling. "To make you happy, I thought about it. But you know what? My answer hasn't changed; I made up my mind years ago."

"But the risk—"

"Is a chance I'm willing to take," she finished. "I know there's a war coming. I know that there will be losses, and that since my last name is Weasley, my chance of being one of the casualties is significantly higher than the average Witch or Wizard."

"You won't be safe..."

"Let me finish," Ginny said softly, elbowing him gently. "I thought about it, Harry, and do you want to know what I finally decided?"

He wasn't sure that he did.

"If this was my last day alive, I'd want to spend it with you."

He opened his mouth to argue, but Ginny got there first. She kissed him.

He kissed her back.

It was a short, sweet kiss, but it left Harry breathless and lightheaded. Some part of him had floated away into bliss, and nothing else seemed to matter right now. Ginny's face broke into smiles again, and she laughed. "What do you have to say to that?" she said in a low voice.

"Obviously it's useless to argue with you," Harry managed to say, still trying to pull himself back down to earth.

"That's the most sensible thing you've said all afternoon."

She leaned her head against his shoulder and they sat there in companionable silence. It was several minutes before Harry realized that he was getting cold. The temperature was fast dropping.

"Are you cold?" he said worriedly, breaking the silence. "Do you want a warming charm?"

Ginny sat up and rolled her eyes. "I thought you'd never ask," she said, and Harry was glad the darkness hid his reddening cheeks.

"Did you think about me while you were gone?" Ginny asked a few minutes later, her head still pillowed on his shoulder. Somehow, Harry's arm had slipped around her.

"Every day," he said quietly. "You?"

"Same," she said. "And then I was so happy when you and Lupin showed up... But then...then you ignored me and I was sure that something had happened, that you had really meant it when you broke up with me last June or that you'd met some other girl..."

"You were ignoring me," Harry protested, but still he pulled her even closer. He never wanted to lose her again. Ever. "To be honest, I thought the same about you."

"You're a prat. You know that, right?"

"How could I forget?" Harry said wryly. "I've got you to remind me."

Ginny sighed contentedly. "If you ever break up with me again, Potter..."

"Let me guess. I can expect several very uncomfortable Bat-Bogey Hexes."

She giggled. "Actually, let's just say you'll think the Death Eaters merciful once I'm done with you."

"Point noted," Harry said solemnly. "It won't happen again."

"Good."

Harry sobered as unwanted thoughts pushed themselves into his brain. "Gin, I don't know what will happen... I have no idea where I may be in a month or two..."

There was still so much to worry about. He and Lupin had to destroy the Horcruxes—again. Snape was constantly in danger playing the faithful spy for Voldemort. He didn't know what to do with his sister; Leila wasn't of age, but she couldn't exactly go to Hogwarts—people would ask questions. Ginny couldn't exactly come with them, she wasn't of age either. Then there was still the prophecy to think about. And on top of all that, the entire Ministry and a host of Death Eaters were still looking for him.

He felt her head leave his shoulder, and turned to see Ginny looking at him, her face illuminated by the light shining from the windows of the house. She took his hands.

"We're in this together," she said softly. "Things will be alright."

And sitting there next to Ginny, Harry couldn't help but believe her.

Somehow, things would be alright.

Author's Note: One more chapter will be posted after this, an epilogue of sorts that explains what happened in the Aperio world after Harry, Lupin, and Snape left. Hopefully it will satisfy those of you who felt I left a lot of things hanging in the other reality.

No promises about when I'll start posting the sequel. I need to take a break and plan the next story out, kind of get my thoughts together on what I want to happen. Believe me, it will have some twists you won't expect. For those of you who want to read the sequel, I'd suggest putting me on Author Alert, or when I start it I'll just post one last chapter here saying that I've begun the story, if that's what you'd like me to do. In the meantime, expect some updates on *Rebuilding the World* and some of my other series.

Soooo, for all 671 of you on the alert list for this story, if you haven't reviewed yet, please do so. I'd really appreciate it.

Chapter 60

In another reality, worlds away, life went on. The general Wizarding population was not immediately affected by the disappearance of a seventeen-year-old boy with messy black hair, a little-known werewolf, and a Death Eater-turned traitor. But not for long.

It started with whispered rumours that Voldemort had attacked Beauxbatons. And failed.

Some thought that the ancient inherent magic of the establishment had been too much for the Dark Lord. But then they figured that he'd gotten into Hogwarts, so Beauxbatons should have been child's play. Others thought that it was an odd coincidence that when the Death Eaters had attacked the school that just *happened* to be the current residence of Nicholas Flamel, their plans were thwarted. If the rumours were true, some said, then maybe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was not as undefeatable as people thought. Hope bloomed in the hearts of many.

And then came the appearance of two mysterious black-cloaked Wizards. The Liberators, they were called by some, by others, the Black Knights. They were rarely seen, but suddenly dozens of families were claiming that they owed their lives to two unknown people who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

The stories of the Liberators became more and more fantastic until no one knew quite what to believe. All they knew was whenever Death Eaters attacked, the two were there, slipping in and out of shadows, taking down the attackers one by one, and using battle methods that had never before been seen. Rumour had it that the two had been endowed with the powers of Merlin himself. The more sensible circles, however guessed that they had stolen Muggle war secrets.

The latter was correct. Sirius and Regulus Black, having decided that they had nothing left to hold them back, had indeed surprised the Wizarding population with their unexpected appearance. With the odds against them, the Black brothers decided to utilize alternative methods to their advantage—one of which being their Animagus forms (Regulus finally admitted that he too was an Unregistered

Animagus. Not surprisingly, his form was a black snake). They also used fear of the unknown, dressing in black and slipping in and out of shadows as they fired sometimes fatal spells and firearms and detonated Muggle bombs and explosives, to strike terror in the Death Eaters, who were rumoured as becoming more and more unwilling to follow Voldemort's every command.

Some whispered that the Dark Lord himself was becoming more and more uneasy as the weeks went by, and the two cloaked Wizards picked off his Death Eaters one by one. Then the story was told that he had attempted some sort of dark magical spell that had left him weak and susceptible. The stories were not far from the truth. Voldemort, having become more and more angry as his lesser Death Eaters were struck down, had tried every plot, every scheme he could think of to destroy the Black brothers. Traps had been set; spells had been tried. But still, the two Liberators evaded his grasp. Becoming desperate, and now only having Nagini as surety for his immortality, he'd attempted to create yet another Horcrux, with dire results.

Then, the news arrived in Britain that Nicholas Flamel was returning to his home country. Many people thought that Flamel was in some way connected with the Liberators, and together they would unite to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the darkest and most evil wizard since Grindelwald. In reality, Flamel was in no way associated with Sirius and Regulus Black, except, of course, in goals and ideologies. Voldemort would have been quite surprised to learn that the sole conspirator with the Black brothers was a sixteen-year-old redheaded girl.

Once Harry, Lupin, and Snape had departed, Ginny had stayed on with Regulus and Sirius, who had quietly abandoned his job at Hogwarts. They lived on at Castaway Cottage, secure in the knowledge that only three other people knew the true whereabouts of the forest-surrounded home: Severus Snape, the true owner, and Harry Potter, the Secret-Keeper. All three, it turned out, were far away from the reach of the Death Eaters in the Aperi world, so the location was secure.

Ginny insisted that she be as involved as possible with the preparations and plans that went into each mission. She was the one

who wished the brothers luck as they apparated away each night, and she was the one to receive them when they arrived back in the wee hours of the morning, exhausted, bruised, and more often than not, victims of Death Eater spells that had found their mark.

As the need for a third wand-user became more evident, Ginny began a campaign that eventually ended in Regulus ordering a specially-made wand from overseas. Japan, to be exact; in that country, the Trace was not placed on adolescents' wands.

Thrilled, she began her self-education at once, and within months had advanced farther than some fifth-years at Hogwarts. This baffled Sirius and Regulus, but they finally agreed that her progress could only be related to her being the seventh child and the first girl born in several generations of Weasleys. Regulus in particular helped her as much as he could, when he wasn't saving the magical and Muggle population from Voldemort's wrath.

The Black brothers were not the only one making an effort to curve the devastation the Death Eaters left in their wake. After Christmas holidays, Alastor Moody turned in his public resignation at Hogwarts and announced his intent to return to the Auror Department at the Ministry. His request was not received well by Lucius Malfoy and the other followers of Voldemort, but Moody had been quite popular during his day, and the general public was behind him. In the end, Minister Malfoy was forced to give Moody a position or risk losing the support of the people. He did, however, put serious restrictions on the experienced ex-Auror—not that the restrictions did much good, though. Mad-Eye was not there to take cases and fight Death Eaters; he was there simply to be an inside influence. He slowly began working his way through the Wizards and Witches hovering in the middle ground, reasoning, questioning, and in the end, convincing them to come back to the Light side and be ready to make a stand if ever a public resistance was made.

Minerva McGonagall remained at Hogwarts, watching over her students like a mother hen. Unfortunately, or maybe not so unfortunately, Dolores Umbridge was put into position as the Defence teacher when another suitable person could not be found. Thus, the students began to realise many of the things Moody had been trying

to tell them for years. They needed to be prepared to fight—and they weren't, and never would be if they relied on Umbridge for proper instruction.

Maybe it was fate that one afternoon, Ron, Jeremy, and Neville remembered something Harry had mentioned in his quick rendition of his other life—a club called Dumbledore's Army that two of their number had been involved in. A plan was formed; a meeting called. The students were interested. Daphne Greengrass, the resident "Hermione," was given the task of creating a way of communication between club members. The association was named The Resistance Club, a list of necessary spells for battle was compiled, Jeremy gave the leaders a lesson on how to use the Room of Requirement, and the R.C. was born.

Some might have thought it was providence that a certain Slytherin named Theodore Nott accidentally found out about the club through eavesdropping on a whispered conversation by two overexcited first year Gryffindors in the library. He approached Daphne, the most reasonable and open-minded of the four leaders, and offered his services. After making him (as well as the other members) swear a carefully modified Wizard's Oath that would inflict painful boils on the unlucky student who divulged information regarding the club, he was accepted. It wasn't long before his rather advanced knowledge of defensive spells was put to good use—teaching the others what he knew.

The semester soon drew to a close; an infuriated Umbridge was no closer to discovering the meeting place of the Resistance Club her Slytherin spies had brought her rumours of. She would have used Veritiserum, had not McGonagall discovered her plans and raised an outcry resulting in a reluctant Ministerial decree that the Truth Serum was not to be used on students.

Near the end of the term, Mrs. Weasley made her intentions clear that she was going to leave Britain and take the remains of her family with her, but to everyone's surprise, Percy Weasley refused, as well as more predictably, Ginny. The former kissed his mother goodbye, then made a public rejection of his family and became immersed in Ministry politics. At first the remaining Order members were shocked,

appalled, and angry, until certain parties began receiving anonymous letters filled with insider information regarding confidential Ministry information. They had a rather good guess at who was sending the correspondences.

The biggest blow-up of all, however, occurred when Ginny refused to leave. Molly Weasley nearly blew up apart the Burrow when the owl arrived, stating that her daughter was going to remain with the Black brothers, and that was that. In the end, Mrs. Weasley was powerless to bodily remove her daughter from the country, as Ginny's residence was currently under the Fidelius Charm. She resignedly surrendered to remaining in Britain and set about making the Burrow as safe as possible from attack.

It was at this time that Flamel finally arrived in Britain, accompanied by his wife and oddly enough a student from Beauxbatons—Hermione Granger. His intentions were clear in Voldemort's eyes, but not from the points of view of the Magical residents. They whispered and watched as Flamel holed up in his residence in Devon, evidently doing nothing.

In reality, while Hermione had come along to help with spell development and to make a long-denied visit to her Muggle parents, she and Flamel were not in Britain just to create spells and enchantments. While she handled the more practical part of the plan, Flamel began contacting every great and powerful Wizard and Witch from across the globe. He invited them to a conference to be held in Geneva, Switzerland, and surprisingly, most accepted.

Being one of the only Wizards in the world who could Apparate across oceans, Flamel did not need a Portkey, and therefore no one but his wife and Hermione knew of his journey to Switzerland on the 27th of June, ironically exactly one year after the three Aperio travelers had arrived in the new reality.

A meeting like the one at Geneva hadn't been seen for a thousand years. Attendees included Hiro Surani of China, Abdul Kashar of Iraq, Svetlana Vassikin of the U.S.S.R., Jordan Kittman of the United States, Gabriella Mendez of Brazil, and many more. They were the elite of their respective countries, the masters of every branch of the

Magical Arts; they were the best. Svetlana Vassikin carried a staff instead of a wand; Hiro Surani carried no wand at all.

Flamel bowed, greeted them, and thanked them for coming. Then he related the plight of the British people, the story of the Aperio, the actions that had been taken, the many deaths, and the tales of unrewarded bravery. Then he appealed for their help.

Hours and days of deliberation followed. Among those supporting the idea of aiding their British brothers was Horst Wittgenstein of Germany, one of the youngest of the group, and a survivor of the last Wizarding War involving Grindelwald. Though only a teen at the time, he remembered Albus Dumbledore coming to the Germans' rescue and felt it only fair that he do what he could in the war against Voldemort.

Many disagreed, however, including U.S. representative Jordan Kittman, who was still brooding over the incident the Muggles called the War of 1812, despite the friendly British-American relations that had been maintained since.

Finally, a decision was reached after nearly a week of deliberation. They would help—all but the Swiss Witch who was bound by a national oath to remain neutral, and the Argentinean Wizard who was unfortunately in the middle of a similar though smaller-scaled war and felt it wrong to abandon his country to help another.

The plan was simple. Take the Ministry of Magic and wait for Voldemort to arrive. They knew he would come; the only question was, would he bring Nagini?

Five days later, the Ministry had fallen and had been turned into a fortress by the most genius-minded Witches and Wizards in the world. Voldemort rallied his followers and prepared to attack.

It was the Battle of the Century. Muggle repelling and concealing charms were placed in a five-mile radius around the Ministry, and fake bombs forced the residents of London to evacuate because of a "terrorist" threat.

Sirius and Regulus, Moody, McGonagall, and the other brave Light Wizards and Witches prepared to attack the Death Eaters from the flanks as those inside of the Ministry readied themselves for the last stand.

Several hundred Death Eaters, an army of Inferi and Dementors, and about six giants were up against twenty-eight International Witches and Wizards and about fifty more Order members and untrained citizens. Voldemort evidently thought the odds were on his side; nevertheless, he did not bring the snake.

Not long into the battle, the Death Eaters realised that they were losing. Attempts to Apparate or Portkey away were thwarted by a clever Moroccan Witch who'd erected large-scale undetectable anti-Apparation and Portkey wards around the premises. When Voldemort realised he was trapped, he attempted to flee on foot, but was repelled by the forces attacking from behind.

Slowly, the Light forces closed in. One by one, Voldemort's followers dropped to the ground, his Inferi went up in flames, the Dementors were repelled by more powerful Patroni that had ever been seen before, and his Giants toppled over, creating mini-earthquakes as they fell to the ground, destroying large sections of Muggle buildings.

In the end, it was Flamel who finished Voldemort off, once and for all, but the others who aided him keeping the darkest villain of all time under control as the oldest Wizard cast an ancient spell of Hermione's making.

Just like the night of Dumbledore's bitter victory, Voldemort disappeared. Not stopping to celebrate, the twenty-eight set off with the help of former Death Eater Regulus Black to find the secret quarters of the Death Eaters. The butchery of Nagini was over quickly, and only then could they rest and return to their respective countries, most of them never to be seen in Britain again.

Great were the celebrations that resulted from the news of Voldemort's final destruction. In the Great Hall of Hogwarts, a more subdued party was held. The remaining Order members attended, including Percy Weasley who was greeted like a hero for his inside work, and the Black brothers, who had amazingly survived the battle,

though McGonagall swore up and down she'd seen the two of them taking on a Giant by unassisted by anyone else.

Ginny was present, finally able to come out of hiding after nearly a year. She too was received like hero, especially after Sirius and Regulus related their midnight tales and insisted they couldn't have managed without her.

There were, however, empty seats. Moody had fallen from a curse fired by Voldemort himself; George Weasley was in the hospital, recovering from an Organ-Crushing Curse that should have taken his life; Kiara had lost her life fighting Bellatrix Lestrange with her bare hands. In the end, it'd been Neville who finished Lestrange off with a well-placed Reducto Curse. He refused to say just why he'd done it, but Minerva McGonagall was pretty sure she knew, having heard the sad story of the Longbottoms' fates from Harry many months before.

Former Order Members weren't the only ones who'd fallen: several students from the Resistance club who had fought even after being warned not to go anywhere near London were among the dead—Seamus Finnigan, a sixth-year Ravenclaw girl, Hannah Abbot, and a Slytherin prefect who had joined the Resistance Club halfway through the semester after some persuasion from Theodore Nott.

Celebration and grieving were necessary, but both were put aside near the end of the celebration as the Order members put their heads together and planned the rebuilding of the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. A new Minister must be appointed; but who? Who would the broken magical population accept?

The people of Britain ended up speaking for themselves. They first offered the Minister position to Flamel, but he said no, stating his intentions to move back to France and have a long and peaceful retirement. Next, Sirius Black was picked, but he denied it. Regulus turned it down as well, and they moved on to McGonagall, who flatly refused, stating that her place was at Hogwarts. The next in line was Arthur Weasley, but he didn't want to be Minister either. Thus the job fell to Percy Weasley, who, after much debate, accepted. Under the guidance of the elder and wiser Wizards, he restored the Ministry to its former glory, repaired Muggle London, and set up standards and

laws to help prevent corruptness and Pureblood partiality from ever infiltrating the Ministry again.

The first law to be lifted was the ban on Muggleborns from living in Britain. Hundreds came out of hiding, finally declaring their true status. Immigration peaked, and the attendance at Hogwarts swelled as parents pulled their children out of the institutions abroad and returned them to their rightful school.

A year later, thousands of Witches and Wizards attended the national party celebrating the day of Voldemort's downfall. At the event, Minerva McGonagall got up, waited for the crowd to quiet, and then began a rather remarkable tale that began with the appearance of three ordinary-looking travelers from another reality. She told how their efforts had ended in disaster, but their devotion had been the spark in the hearts of many who had continued the fight and finally prevailed against evil. Finally, the true story behind Voldemort's defeat was told.

In the party held at Hogwarts afterwards, Neville and Daphne Greengrass announced their engagement and coincidentally, Ginny Weasley and Theodore Nott met for the first time after a clumsy accident that resulted in spilled wine and red-faced apologies. He asked her to dance with him, and she accepted with a dazzling smile.

The remaining Weasleys attended the party, George looking even better than ever before and escorting a grinning Katie Bell. Ron appeared, immediately finding Jeremy Javan and giving him a back-slapping hug. The youngest Weasley son then introduced his old friend to the dark haired female Seeker he'd brought with him from the Chudley Cannons, which he played for.

Hermione was at the party as well, and she would have faded into the background had not McGonagall spotted her and dragged her to the front, calling a toast to the young girl genius whose work had produced the spells necessary to not only send the Aperio travelers back to their rightful world, but also to end the war. After a blushing Hermione thanked the crowd, someone asked her what she planned to do, and she revealed that she'd been offered a position at Beauxbatons that she'd accepted. She would be the youngest

teacher in the history of all three rival schools: Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Hogwarts.

Finally the Minister of Magic showed up, strutting pompously across the room and clearing his throat into a Sonorus spell. He was still Percy, after all. “Attention. Attention, everyone!”

Soon the room was silent, every face upturned expectantly.

Percy straightened his glasses and nodded courteously to the crowd. “As you know, we are here to celebrate the victory over Voldemort.”

Cheers. Applause. Whistles. Even a dozen Dementors couldn’t have lowered their spirits tonight.

Percy waited once again, and when the room was quiet, he said, “We are also here to remember those who didn’t make it though the war—the friends and family who paid the ultimate price for the freedom we enjoy today: The Potters. Nymphadora Tonks. My own brothers Charlie and Bill Weasley. Alastor Moody. The Longbottoms. Kingsley Shacklebolt. Fleur Delacour. Rubeus Hagrid. Kiara Thompson. Sturgis Podmore. And the many others who died bravely. They will always be remembered for what they did. They are the ones we owe our lives to.”

Many eyes were wet. Someone in the back of the room blew their nose rather loudly.

“But even as we look back, we are reminded that the past is the past. We can remember, we can tribute, but the best thing we can do is look to the future. Learning from the past, we can resolve not to let it ever happen again, and concentrate on living our lives to the fullest, just as they’d have wanted us to do.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled through her tears, clutching Arthur’s arm.

“But before we turn our sights on the future before us, I’d like to propose a toast to the three special people who unfortunately cannot be with us today. They are the ones who originally reformed the Order and found the Horcruxes. Without them, we’d still be under Voldemort’s regime, hiding in our homes, hoping that we wouldn’t be

the next target. Because of these three, we were able to muster up our courage to do what we knew was right.

“I’d like to propose a toast to Harry Potter, Remus Lupin, and Severus Snape for their bravery, courage, and dedication. Wherever they are, I have faith that they will be able to defeat Voldemort in their world. May they save their own world, and then live long and prosperous lives. To Harry, Remus, and Snape!”

In another world, Harry Potter did not know that hundreds of glasses were being lifted in his honour, but he suddenly felt a pinprick of unexplainable gratitude inside of his chest. And he smiled.

Author’s Note: My appologies. I’ve written way more than I meant to on the epilogue. Now in advance for those of you who are upset about who Ginny ended up with, I happen to think Theodore is a nice guy and I like him so no flames, please. The REAL Ginny ended up with Harry.

I can’t believe this is the end... This story has been such a huge part of my life for the last six months, but all good things must come to an end eventually, I suppose.

I’ll post another update on this story alerting you when I begin the sequel, but I’ll only leave it up for a week or so. I like the sixty chapters even thing. Sixty is a good number, and it feels right to stop the story here.

Last chance to review. What’d you think of the story overall, the plotline, characterizations, and the ending? Oh, and if you’ve got any good ideas for the title for the sequel, I’d be appreciative. I’m drawing a blank.